“Sweat is weakness leaving the body”
A study on the self-presentational practices of sporty top managers in Sweden

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Abstract
Embracing the symbolic interactionist view of the notion of self, applying dramaturgical theories of self-presentation, this study unpacks the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours (in athletic endeavours) and the formation of their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective. I conducted a study of a group of sporty top managers in Sweden. With interviews and observations, I anchored the research focus in verbal expressions within storytelling and in performative expressions of the top managers. Drawing on social interpretations of sport and athleticism and with a dramaturgical analytical frame, I examine how the sporty top managers interpret their athletic endeavours to express important values, beliefs and concerns to express ‘whom they want to become’ as occupants of the leadership role.

The analysis shows that lifestyle behaviours in athletic endeavours serve as a new source of self-meanings with which the sporty top managers create and express wishful notions about themselves as occupants of the leadership role. By incorporating athletic values with their distinctive understanding of a ‘good leader’, the top managers seek to present themselves with an idealized image of ‘athletic leaders’. In this process, the top managers outline a role-script that is mainly characterized with self-disciplinary qualities and masculine values, they define the leadership context with athleticism in the centre, and they express an overt intent to elevate some people and exclude others in organizational processes based on athletic values in which they personally believe. Hence, the process of formation of self as ‘athletic leaders’ is not only ‘self-relevant’, but it is personally, interpersonally and socially (organizationally) meaningful. The analysis also shows that the top managers seek to give legitimacy and an elitist status to the idealized view of self by using expressive strategies to appropriate their appearances, regulate emotions and bodily senses, and mould a gendered self-image.

This thesis contributes to leadership studies in several ways. First, the study expands on extant literature theorizing the linkage between lifestyle behaviours and the formation of sense of self as occupants of the leadership role from a new angle. It contends that lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours have become a prime site where business leaders express creative narratives regarding an idealized view of themselves. Second, this study further advocates that the formation of sense of self of leaders is not a simple outcome of different forms of regulative discursive regime. Rather, this process involves creative self-reflexive activities that address individuals’ personally held values, their distinctive pursuits in becoming an idealized leader, relations with others, and some prevailing leadership notions that they believe to be closely associated with the nature of lifestyle behaviours in which they engage and commit. Third, this study confirms the notion that the formation of the understanding of self of leaders is not only a function of verbal expressive devices, but that it also involves individuals’ performative strategies in ‘expressive control’ (e.g. Down & Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1959). This thesis adds to understanding this point of view through a discussion of self-presentational practices in non-work related activities. Finally and most importantly, this study suggests that the process of formation of the sense of self of business leaders is expressive of meanings on personal, interpersonal and social dimensions in its own right. That is, through creating new self-meanings in micro-level practices in lifestyle behaviours, the occupants of the leadership role define the situational characteristics (the leadership context), express intentions to enact the power feature of inclusion and exclusion of others, generate new understanding of the leadership role, and they reproduce and strengthen some prevailing leadership ideals.

Keywords: sport, athleticism, self-expressive behaviours, self-presentation.

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Janet Johansson
To my family

感謝你們一如既往的愛和支持
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1. Introduction

Adam gets up at five in the morning on a summer day. Outside his waterside house in this prestigious suburb of Stockholm, a light drizzle of rain coats the sky. He goes straight to the jetty and puts his kayak into the water. The breeze is slightly chilly, but Adam is looking forward to kicking off the day with his regular early morning kayaking session. One hour later, he is back in the house, soaked in sweat but energized, ready for a new working day. Arriving at work around 9am, Adam does not go directly to his office. In fact, he does not like sitting at the computer on his desk reading emails or dealing with the numbers that he receives from his CFO. He likes to be in motion at all times: “My job is to inspire and motivate people by what I do.” He greets his colleagues in the cafeteria, chats a bit with a few employees about the marathon that took place at the weekend, says that he did not go due to his knee injury but will definitely go to the next race ...

Adam holds a management training course for new employees at 10am. He opens this two-day course by talking about his athletic lifestyle and explaining what the company’s value watchword ‘healthy’ means. At noon, Adam leaves the office for his tennis training with a former elite tennis player who is also a close friend. After two hours of training, Adam comes back to the office just to check if anyone needs him. At 5pm, he calls it a day and is on his way to pick up his children from day care and school. They will do some sports together and then, after dinner, during TV time, Adam plans to challenge his children on who can do ‘planking’ for the longest time.

The above is a brief illustration of what Adam – the CEO and partner of an engineering consultancy company – describes as an ideal day when he is not travelling or overwhelmed by a busy schedule of meetings. Like other participants in this study, Adam actively engages in an athletic lifestyle and passionately devotes time to such endeavours, viewing them as an important part of his leadership role.
1.1 Background: “The making of corporate athletes”

Some executives thrive under pressure, others wilt. Is the reason all in their heads? Hardly. Sustained high achievement demands physical and emotional strength as well as a sharp intellect. To bring mind, body, and spirit to peak performance, executives need to learn what world-class athletes already know.

(Loehr & Schwartz, 2001: 1)

Leadership scholars Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz used the above quote as the opening lines in their article titled “The Making of Corporate Athletes”. In leadership studies, prescriptive writings as such aim to tackle the making not only of the mind of a business person, but also of the body. Echoing this aspiration, popular business magazines such as Fortune, Business Week and Forbes publish articles about fitness, athletic characters and their incorporation into the world of business executives. They portray the emerging wave in the healthy living and wellbeing trend as an indication of a new aspect of competence that a successful business leader ought to acquire.

For example, in one article in Fortune magazine, “The CEO Workout”1, the author discusses whether managing physical energy, rather than managing time, is the ultimate method of corporate athletes in the 21st century. In Fortune’s blog, Shelley DuBois’ article seeks to explain “Why You Should Make Your Executives Sweat”2 by arguing that doing so can “make participants think sharper and work hard the old-fashioned way”.

In Sweden, top managers and CEOs are said to be becoming increasingly active in sports and athletic activities. A study in the Swedish journal Chef (Boss)3 reports that the frequency of physical exercise among Swedish managers increases as managers climb the organizational ladder. Sixty per cent of the surveyed managers are convinced that physical activity is

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important for their career and almost four-fifths of respondents who have a higher position today than five years ago claim that they work out more than they did in their previous job. One CEO who was interviewed in relation to the survey said the following:

*Physical exercise does not only make you slim and feel good. A few more rounds to your jogging route also make you a better boss and it is beneficial to your career [...] Had I not been in such good shape, I would not have reached the position where I am today.*

Newspapers and the business press speak of a new category of corporate “elite sportsmen” – sporty leaders between 30 and 50 years of age who hold prominent positions in their organizations whilst seeking to mimic the exercise routines, sleeping habits, diet and entire lifestyle of an elite athlete. It is not uncommon for these “corporate athletes” to show off their athletic merits on their CV in the belief that their physical mastery is a sign of enhanced professional competences.

Indeed, taking part in high-intensity sports competitions such as long distance running, cycling, swimming and cross-country skiing is becoming increasingly popular amongst Swedish business executives, managers and professionals. Many companies have entire teams of managers and employees participating in the Swedish Classic Circuit, which consists of the 30km Lidingöloppet run, the 300km Vätternrundan cycling race, the 3km Vansbro swimming race and the 90km cross-country skiing race Vasaloppet.

Furthermore, the Swedish business press has shown great interest in this trend of promoting healthy living through sporting at the workplace with a focus on leadership. Viewing participation in such athletic activities as a sign of leadership competence, one business magazine organizes an annual Competence Gala and Manager of the Year Award event to celebrate outstanding performances amongst business executives. The Manager of the Year Award consists of a total seven awards, including a Healthy Manager award, which is given to the manager who has been most successful in inspiring employees to take physical exercise and in creating the best organizational conditions for the improvement of employee health.

Moreover, in Sweden as in other Nordic countries, business executives who vigorously engage in sports activities make frequent headlines in the business

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4 English translation of a quote in a Swedish article by Johansson, A, in Dagens Nyheter November, 21, 2012, p. 16

press. In Dagens Industri, which is the Swedish equivalent of the Financial Times, the Saturday issue often reports extensively on the training routines and sports activities of executives. In the spring of 2012, Dagens Industri published a series of articles under the headline “The Executive Duel”, in which two executives would compete in a given sport. The series of competitions took place between January and June. It began with a downhill skiing competition between two CEOs and concluded with a marathon with three company CEOs. This event gained much public attention, and the companies whose CEOs were involved sent personnel to film and document the competition for internal communication. The sporty leaders who are busy exercising and challenging their own physical limits are said to put a particular emphasis on leadership goals.

1.2 The research

The perspective of leadership is changing. The emergence of ‘elite sportsmen’ in top positions seems to challenge the conventional understanding of leadership as primarily the work of the mind. Today, business leaders not only rely on what they say and do in the workplace to demonstrate their skills competences and ‘traits’ as good leaders, but they also increasingly incorporate lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours in their leadership manifestation.

As mentioned earlier, a growing number of top managers in Sweden vigorously engage in an athletic lifestyle; they watch their diet carefully, maintain regular exercising routines, and participate in sports competitions. At the same time, many of them connect such athletic endeavours to their professional role as leaders. It seems athleticism has grown to become an important indication of their self-image as a capable, competent leader. By constantly presenting heightened physical mastery and disciplined exercise routines, these individuals add lifestyle factors such as sporting prowess to their understanding of the notion of ‘person-job-fit’.

Researchers in the sociology of athleticism have explained that lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours are primarily expressive of important gender values, beliefs, emotions and feelings that contribute to people’s understanding of self in social life (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Broom & Tovey, 2009; Kuhn, 2006; Keane, 2009; Lee & Cockman, 1995). For example, socially, athleticism is taken as a strong indicator of power, status and privileged masculinities (Haraway, 1990; Courtenay, 2009; Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Broom & Tovey, 2009). Scholars have also pointed out that the well-trained, disciplined athletic body is often regarded as a symbol of a
successful person that has been orchestrated to express and enhance personal values and status in social life (Turner, 1984). People tend to improve their image in professional domains through imitating behaviours of professional athletes (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). Therefore, fitness, athletic endeavours and health behaviours make a ‘prime site’ where people negotiate their social landscapes, elevate their status and define themselves as gendered individuals (Haggard & Williams, 1992; Wheaton, 2004; Courtenay, 2009; Connell, 1987; Chambliss & Blair, 2005; Crawford, 1984).

These above-mentioned notions on social interpretations of athleticism suggest that people enact their experiences in lifestyle behaviours in order to express values and beliefs that are vital for their sense of self in social life and in professional domains. Hence, athleticism and sporting prowess that is obtained outside the workplace may also be expressive indicators of leaders’ competences, status, successfulness and powerfulness at work (Sinclair, 2005c; Maravelias, 2015).

In leadership studies, scholars have taken different theoretical approaches towards the phenomenon of ‘leaders in sport’. Some scholars prescribe athletic endeavours as a self-evident positive contribution to “thriving leaders” and effective leadership practices (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001; Quick, Macik-Frey, & Cooper, 2007). Other scholars problematize the phenomenon of ‘leaders in sport’ (Sinclair, 2005b; Thanem, 2013). Amongst them, Thanem reveals the “uncharismatic” side of the “transgressive” leaders who enact personal passions excessively in their leadership practices (e.g. Thanem, 2013).

In recent years, one stream of studies has begun to address the linkage between athletic endeavours and the formation of the sense of self as leader. For example, some research devotes its attention to theorizing “managerial athleticism” as a new form of “regulative regime” that defines the identity and corporeality of occupants of the leadership role (e.g. Johansson et al., 2017b; Johansson, 2013c). In the same line of reasoning, Maravelias (2015) contends that the enhanced athleticism and competitiveness amongst business leaders is an outcome of increasingly invisible neoliberal managerial pressure (ibid.).

Extant research that points out the linkage between athletic endeavours and leaders’ sense of self has intrigued my research interests. Focusing on explaining the significance of the regulative force of social meanings of sport, fitness and athleticism and its impact on leaders’ sense of self (e.g. Maravelias,

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6 This article is based on part of the empirical material that is presented in the current thesis.
7 This conference paper is based on part of the empirical material that is presented in the current thesis.
2015; Johansson et al., 2017), these studies provide profound insights on understanding how lifestyle behaviours come to substitute formal managerial coercions and take on non-dogmatic regulative force to enlist managers in constant identity work.

Nonetheless, little has been done to comprehensively explain how leaders, as other social actors, through self-initiatives, use their skills in lifestyle behaviours such as athletic activities as sources of self-meanings to negotiate their social landscape - to create and/or express new nuances of self-meanings in the formation of their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role. Such an oversight tends to understate individuals’ creativity in the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role; which may lead to a misconception that the formation of self of leaders is a docile and normative process that is solely burdened by discursive ‘baggage’ in different forms (Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2008).

Furthermore, leadership scholars have previously pointed out that leaders’ behaviours are not always instrumentally calculative for the fulfilment of leadership objectives. Rather, leaders’ engagements in some activities are “self-expressive of individual feelings, aesthetic values and self-concepts” (e.g. Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993: 580; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In other words, leaders, intentionally or unintentionally, use their utterances and actions in some activities to convey important values, beliefs and concerns that compose the vital base of their understanding of selves in the workplace. Yet few studies have focused on exploring the self-expressiveness of leaders’ behaviours that are outside the work environment. Responding to this lack, Sinclair has suggested scholars should view leaders as ‘living beings’ and move research attention onto activities - that are beyond the narrow notion of work settings, and above the conventional understanding about what leaders do, to gain a comprehensive understanding of these occupants of the leadership role (Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Ford et al., 2008).

Hence, considering social interpretative meanings of sports and athleticism, and taking into account that athletic endeavours may be indicators of important elements with which people comprise their sense of self, this thesis aims to unpack the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours in athletic endeavours and the formation of their sense of self from a self-expressive perspective. By ‘self-expressiveness’, I mean expressions (including both utterances and actions) which individuals enact to interpret their experience to convey the feelings, emotions, important values, beliefs and concerns that are vital components in their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012).
Moreover, in leadership studies, there are competing views about the formation of leaders’ sense of self as occupants of the leadership role. On the one hand, there is a standing view which contends that the formation of leaders’ sense of self anchors in self-reflexive activities that are regulated by managerial discursive practices in the workplace (e.g. Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993: 580; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Svenningsson & Larsson, 2006; Beech, 2008). Studies in this stream primarily take available leadership discourses and managerial notions in the workplace as a major source of self-meanings for occupants of the leadership role (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Svenningsson & Larsson, 2006). On the other hand, an increasing number of scholars call for more research attention to be paid to the “intimate” and interactive aspects in the formation of the leader’s self (Beech, 2008: 15; Ford et al., 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009). These scholars suggest that occupants of the leadership role not only bear ‘discursive baggage’ while constructing the understanding of selves as leaders, but that they also actively engage in both interpreting prevailing notions about leaders (and leadership) and producing the self that is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful (Beech, 2008; Ford et al., 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009; Sinclair, 2005c).

Considering both the insights and oversights that remain in the extant research of leaders’ sense of self, I examine individuals’ interpretations of their experiences of athletic endeavours by focusing not only on how they ‘comply’ with existing leadership notions, but also on how they address personal values, their relations with others and the social environment (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012). This is to avoid conceptualizing the self-process as merely socially burdened, and to bring forth the ‘intimate’ and interactive aspects in one self-formation process (Sinclair, 2013; 2005c; Ford et al., 2008; Beech, 2008).

Therefore, through unpacking the linkage between leaders’ athletic endeavours and the formation of their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective, this thesis engages in discussions around the formation of leaders’ sense of self in several ways. First, this thesis brings lifestyle behaviours to the centre of theorizing the formation of the sense of self of occupants of the leadership role from a new angle. It goes further to illuminate the role of lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours in the formation of the sense of self of leaders by scrutinizing how individuals create and express major self-concepts through interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours. Second, through highlighting individuals’ self-expressions regarding lifestyle behaviours, this thesis devotes itself to advocating that leaders’ sense of self may not merely be the outcome of the ‘regulative regime’ of available, dominant managerial discourses in different forms. Focusing on self-expressions - that address personal values, relations with others, and the social environment - this study
intends to shed light on understanding the formation of the sense of self of leaders as a personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful process that emerges both inside and outside the workplace (e.g. Ford et al., 2008; Beech, 2008:72; Sinclair, 2005a, 2013).

Moreover, considering their inherent power position in the workplace, it is important to understand how sporty managers/executives interpret their experiences from lifestyle behaviours to express values, beliefs and concerns, which make the vital basis of the understanding of self as the occupant of the leadership role. The occupants of the leadership role are the group of individuals in organizations who enjoy the inherent institutional power and privileges to define realities of others (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). They create and manage meanings in organizations through utterances and actions to facilitate the formation of new forms of organizational wisdom and to foster (or impose) others’ imitative behaviours (e.g. Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). The scrutiny of how this group of individual express important values, beliefs about themselves, others and the social environment in a self-formation process may shed light on understanding the forging of some organizational norms, value bases for others’ actions and even for the formation of identities of others (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Johansson et al., 2017).

In order to fulfil the research aim - which is devoted to providing a thorough scrutiny of how sporty managers and/or corporate executives interpret their experiences from lifestyle behaviours to create and convey important self-meanings to form the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role - I adopt a symbolic interactionist world view as conceptual grounding for this study. The symbolic interactionist view construes social actors as meaning-agents who actively create new nuances of meanings in social interactions (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). That is, people act upon things or engage in certain types of behaviours based on meanings that are already residing in these things (behaviours); and we create new nuances of meanings upon our evaluations of the social encounters (about things, people, social surroundings) through interpreting our experiences in these actions in social interactions (Charon, 1989; Schlenker, 1980; Waskul & Vannini, 2006; Stryker, 1968). It is within this process that we, as social actors, are capable of making changes in society (Mead, 1934).

The symbolic interactionist world view allows my research to allocate leaders in both subject (I) and object (me) positions in the process of self-formation. In other words, leaders are like other social actors; while adhering to conventional notions of their social role, they constantly shape an idealized view of self to add new elements in the understanding of their role. Hence, they are presumably capable of making changes in leadership notions through
becoming their role as leaders (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). From this theoretical viewpoint, this study is able to scrutinize the process in which individuals interpret their experiences from lifestyle behaviours based on meanings residing in these behaviours, and simultaneously create and convey new nuances of self-meanings in the same self-expressions (Schlenker, 1980, 1985, 2012; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969).

Furthermore, in order to conduct research into a thorough scrutiny of the process of self-formation, I apply dramaturgical theories of self-presentation as the theoretical instrument and the analytical toolkit. Dramaturgical theories of self-presentation embrace the symbolic interactionist assumptions of self. Viewing life as a stage and people as performers, dramaturgical theories of self-presentation consider the formation of self as a process where social actors enact self-expressions (both verbal and non-verbal) to create and convey (new) wishful notions regarding ‘whom they want to become’ (which are often better than they actually are) to others (Schlenker, 1980; Goffman, 1959).

I choose dramaturgical theories on self-presentation for my research for two reasons. First, studies along these lines typically focus on examining subtle self-presentational practices in which actors use verbal and non-verbal expressions to convey the “desired” image of self in social life (e.g. Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006; Goffman, 1959). Second, dramaturgical theories of self-presentation construe the formation of self as an integration of actors’ understanding of the social situation, their understanding of self in that situation, as well as their evaluations of others (Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012). Hence, studies using these theories often address a broad range of expressive information about the ‘lifeworld’ of social actors (Schlenker, 1980). Studying the formation of leaders’ understanding of self in this way does not isolate the self within social actors’ own cognitive processes, nor does it reduce the self to the product of coercion of social norms. It not only explains how people express wishful notions that concern “whom they want to become”, but also reveals their thoughts around the assessment of others and the situational characteristic in a particular social (organizational) context.

This study aims to unpack the linkage between lifestyle behaviours (such as athletic endeavours) and the formation of the sense of self amongst occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective. Embracing symbolic interactionist assumptions about the notion of self and applying theories of self-presentation, I conduct a study of self-presentational practices of sporty managers/executives from Sweden. In this study, I examine how a group of sporty business leaders interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours (through both verbal and non-verbal self-expressions) to convey an idealized image of themselves as the occupants of the leadership role.
Before ending the introductive chapter here, I explain the use of different terms in this thesis in order to avoid any confusion. In social studies, terms such as self, selfhood and identity are distinguished in different research disciplines; yet they are also used interchangeably at times (Leary & Tangney, 2012; Gecas, 1982; Weigert & Gecas, 2005). One of the recurrent notions is that one’s sense (understanding) of self contains multiple types of identities that relate to the different social roles the person occupies (McCall & Simmons, 1966). Hence, some scholars construe the sense of self as an accumulation of multiple role identities (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1966; Starkey & Hatchuel, 2002; Thoits, 1983). Thus, identity renders different labels to the self upon the various social roles one takes on in social life (ibid.).

In theories of self-presentation, Schlenker takes the identity (that relates to a social role) as the outcome of repeated self-presentations of social actors that take place to address the same group of audiences over a long period of time (Schlenker, 1980, 1985). Hence, for Schlenker, the formation of self in self-presentational practices is a fleeting process that occurs in relative brief social interactions; whereas for Schlenker, ‘identity’ results in relatively ‘stable’ self-presentational practices over a longer period (ibid.).

In this study, adopting Schlenker’s proposal on the notion of “self”, I use the phrase “the formation of understanding of self as the occupant of the leadership role” or “the formation of the sense of self as a leader” to refer to the momentary construction of the understanding of self in self-presentational expressions. This self-process relates to the social role individuals occupy, and is conveyed through individuals’ self-presentational practices. Hence, this term denotes the process in which social actors use expressive features, such as language and other expressive apparatus, including clothing, gestures and emotional expressions, to articulate self-verified (wishful) notions about “whom they want to become” in a social setting (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980).

Furthermore, the use of the term “self-meaning” is largely influenced by Osgood and colleagues’ work (1957) in which the authors explain that self-meanings are “representational mediation process[es]” that “come to be known and understood by an individual through interaction with others …as a performer in a particular role” (Burke, 1980:19). Hence, the formation of the sense (understanding) of self based on emerging self-meanings that relate to the social role approximates to the concept of role identity (Stryker & Statham, 1985; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Burke, 1980). In addition, the term ‘identity’ and ‘identity work’ (which also relates to individuals’ social/professional role as leaders) appears in parts of the literature review of leadership studies indicating similar notion to role-identity and the “formation of the sense of
self as leaders”. In order to prevent any confusion, I avoid using these terms interchangeably yet, when referring to previous studies, ‘role-identity’, ‘identity’ and ‘identity work’ may occur in the text. Moreover, I use “an imaginative view of themselves” and “an idealized view of themselves” interchangeably to indicate the image which contains wishful notions that people generate during the process of the formation of the sense of self.

Finally, from this point on, I use ‘the sporty top managers’ as a descriptive term to address the research participants. The study of the self-presentational practices of ‘the sporty top managers’ is to render a vivid illustration and a social analysis on how they – like performers on the stage, and through enacting self-expressions in athletic endeavours - become an idealized view of themselves as occupants of the leadership role.

1.3 Outline of this thesis

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. In the next chapter, I provide a more detailed review of previous sociological studies on the notion of athleticism and sporting behaviours. I explain how previous studies project lifestyle approaches such as athletic behaviours as self-expressive behaviours that convey important values and beliefs of social actors’ sense of self in social life. Following this, I introduce current leadership studies that focus on the phenomenon of ‘athletic leaders’. I illustrate how existing literature conceptualizes athletic endeavours in leadership studies; and I point out the importance of understanding leaders’ athletic endeavours from a self-expressive aspect.

In Chapter 3, I introduce theories of self-presentation. I explain how these theories facilitate my research on the linkage between self-formation process of sporty top managers and their athletic endeavours. In Chapter 4, the chapter on method, I describe methodological considerations, the empirical setting, the process of the empirical study, and the dramaturgical analytical frame that is used.

In Chapter 5, I present the life stories of five sporty top managers, following which I present a two-fold dramaturgical analysis. The first part of the analysis in Chapter 6 focuses on examining ways in which the sporty top managers “give” information about the imaginative view of themselves. The second part of the analysis pays attention to other forms of expressive strategies that are used by the top managers. In Chapter 7, I discuss findings of the analysis of the self-presentation of the five sporty top managers by allocating the findings
in a leadership context. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I summarize the contributions and implications, and make suggestions for further research.
2. Literature review

This study anchors its research interests in the phenomenon of “leaders in sport”. I aim to unpack the linkage between sporty top managers’ rigorous engagement in athletic endeavours and the formation of their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective. In order to understand the phenomenon of “leaders in sport”, in this literature review I first provide a general view of social interpretations of athleticism and athletic endeavours. I introduce sociological works on the notion of athleticism. This part of the literature review gives an overview of social interpretations and symbolic meanings that are residing in athletic endeavours and athleticism; and of how social actors commonly enact these symbolic meanings as self-expressions in social life.

Following this, I provide a brief review on how sporting activities and athleticism have been theorized in leadership studies in different ways; and how some scholars have attempted to connect athletic endeavours with the formation of leaders’ sense of selves. Thereafter, I present some competing views in extant studies on leaders’ sense of self, and I point out the oversight that still remains in extant research. Based on this, I propose symbolic interactionist assumptions of self as the theoretical grounding for this study.

2.1 Sport and self

Sport and athletic endeavours involve athleticism. Athleticism is the quality of having the kind of strength and energy that makes a great athlete. It takes athleticism to run marathons, play football and to win competitions. In all sports, athleticism refers to what athletes can do with their body, which is often regarded as being related directly to their success (e.g. Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011: 206). Socially, athleticism represents values such as celebrating physical competence, persistence, self-reliance, desire for success, aggression and power (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Leaman & Carrington, 1985).

Although athleticism is closely associated with leisure activities, it is also regarded as a powerful indicator of various social values and norms - such as
masculine values, a desire to win and for success, a heightened degree of competitiveness etc. - that people hold in social life (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Leaman & Carrington, 1985). Through engaging in athletic endeavours, people strive for societal ideals of body image, negotiate social landscape as gendered individuals, and demonstrate competences, competitiveness and desire for success in their social life (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011).

In other words, people tend to interpret their activities in athletic endeavours to highlight values and beliefs they hold and qualities they maintain in different circumstances in social life. They mould a “successful body” to pronounce enhanced personal values and to present themselves as a “successful person” (Turner, 1984). Hence, lifestyle behaviours such as engaging in sports and fitness are not only indicators of enhanced physical mastery or sporting prowess; they are also symbols of the value basis of social actors’ understanding of self.

2.1.1 Social interpretations of athleticism

An extensive amount of work in the sociology of sport and athleticism render much profound insight into how social actors use their experiences from athletic endeavours to create, negotiate and communicate various meaningful notions about themselves in social life (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). These studies explain that people engage in athletic activities to different degrees to negotiate a social landscape that consists of enhanced values, aesthetic ideals, social status and a gendered view of themselves (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Leary, 1992; Goggin & Morrow, 2001: 58; Crossett, 1990; Messner & Sabo, 1994). This literature review provides an overview of the social interpretations of sport and athleticism from four aspects: the bodily ideals, the association with the notion of health, gendered values, as well as the indication of class and status.

Athleticism and bodily ideals

Aesthetic values lie at the heart of athleticism (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). Athletes train to increase their physical strength, competitiveness, stamina and desire to win (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). They develop a lithe, lean, toned and muscular physique, to present themselves with enhanced physical mastery and aesthetics (ibid.). In professional sports, elite athletes pursue perfect body images not only to retain physical competitiveness, but also to maintain a confident sense of self and to project a positive impression in public (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). This is because the high level of physical training involved in constructing and maintaining the body image of an athlete is symbolic of strength, success, competitiveness and stamina. Hence, the aesthetics of the
body image of athletes closely resembles “societal body ideals” (i.e. lean, lithe, toned and muscular)” (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011: 207).

Furthermore, different sports require different physical strength and aesthetics of the body, which in turn represent distinctive social interpretations. For example, the body of an attacking rugby player or a football lineman is often strong, sturdy and with massive muscle mass. Such a physique represents attacking aggression, power and forcefulness (Leaman & Carrington, 1985). Cross-country runners often have lean and lithe bodies. They manifest enduring strength, consistency and long-lasting courage and stamina. In martial arts, the ideal body image must be able to convey aggression and explosive power. Professional athletes strive to maintain bodily aesthetics in different ways to present their competence and strength in different sports. Striving to shape the body strictly in accordance with divergent aesthetic standards is the method with which athletes maintain confidence, self-esteem and personal satisfaction in their respective competitive domains (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Leaman & Carrington, 1985).

Socially, the physique of male athletes is regarded as visible indicators of power, competence and ability. Because of these values conveyed through the body image of male athletes, the physique of a fit man is often thought to define masculinity (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). For example, the image of a male athlete with a highly controlled physique is often presented in newspapers, magazines and other media as a symbol of masculine values such as physical strength, power, confidence and independence, as well as aesthetic attraction (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011: 207).

Moreover, popular notions of athleticism frequently align visible fitness and physical strength of the body with success, status and powerfulness (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). Toned, muscular, highly disciplined athletic bodies are regarded as indicators of a successful person (Turner, 1984: 111). In addition, exterior features such as weight, size, shape and the appearance of the body are typically used as visible indicators of the inner quality of a person (Courtenay, 2009).

Socially, lithe, fit and slender bodies are typically taken as symbols of successful, hard-working and competent personal qualities; whereas overweight and oversized bodies are deemed to indicate sloppiness and irresponsible attitudes toward work. Yet, some scholars argue that the increasing obsession with physical mastery that excessively emphasizes the surface appearance of the body creates harmful assumptions that pertain to the external evaluation of a person’s internal qualities (Chambliss & Blair, 2005). Such assumptions increase the risk that people who are labelled “overweight” will have fewer employment opportunities (Chambliss & Blair, 2005).
In addition, physical mastery that accentuates athleticism projects a discriminatory view about the ageing body (Faircloth, 2003). Conventionally, the notion of athleticism is associated with youthful, capable, powerful bodies. With age comes decreased mobility and flexibility. Athleticism thus clearly declines with age (Faircloth, 2003). Concerning these general notions, Tulle argues that older bodies are increasingly targeted in health intervention measures that have a high focus on physical exercise and athletic endeavours (Tulle, 2003: 233). While older bodies are marginalized in sports and other physically competitive activities, physical exercise and athletic endeavours are highly recommended for older adults for the widely acknowledged effect of “reducing or preventing functional declines” linked to ageing (Goggin & Morrow, 2001: 58).

Moreover, previous studies indicate that people mobilize athletic behaviours to confront the ageing process to achieve two types of effects: the actual physiological effect and the effect on the person’s sense of self (Tulle, 2003; Goffin & Morrow, 2001). In a research study which focuses on the self-narratives of older runners, Tulle (2003) explores the notion that older elite runners use the act of running to challenge the ageing process not only for the physiological benefits of running, but because they also induce profound self-meanings from such athletic endeavours. In this case, the former athletes aim to establish or reform their self-concepts that are based on athletic values by engaging in intensive running activities. Tulle’s study indicates that in many cases, the desire to maintain a sense of self that is connected to the physical hallmarks of athletes in terms of social and cultural values of fitness, slimness and youthfulness may outweigh the actual intention in physiological enhancement (Tulle, 2003; 234).

**Athleticism, health and fitness**

Athleticism is closely associated with the notion of health and fitness. Social actors tend to use their engagements in sporting activities to bring forth the fit and ‘healthy’ aspects of themselves. Scholars have pointed out that sport, among other lifestyle indicators such as a controlled diet and regulated abstinence is the most practised intervention in promoting good health in society and in the workplace (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Leaman & Carrington, 1985; Kelly et al., 2002). People tend to engage in sport activities to make up a healthy self-image. This is also based on a general view that the good health indicates good qualities of a person (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

However, there is a paradox in the relation between sports, athleticism and health (Keane, 2009). On the one hand, research has scientifically proved and symbolically reinforced the notion that in social life, sports activities enhance
our physiological state and psychological wellbeing (Fox, 1999: 164). Thus, the association between sport, athleticism and good health is widely accepted (Waddington, 2000: 408). In time, the notion of health comes to be equated with the attainment of exterior features such as the size, shape and weight of a body that resembles an athlete.

On the other hand, Crawford (1984) points out that the fact that the contemporary concept of good health extensively concerns the shape, size and the capacity of the body is problematic in different ways. Excessive pursuits in sports activities may cause injuries, pain and physical fatigue. Elite athletes often face both physical constraints and mental pressures when striving to maintain an ideal body image in their field of competition. They constantly confront repeated physical challenges that risk damaging their health, and they also experience anxiety and humiliation as sports competitions mark their bodies as inadequate (Keane, 2009).

Nonetheless, the universally accepted association between health, fitness and athleticism leads to a general oversight of the ‘dark side’ of the notion of health that is caused by exhaustive physical mastery. Hence, the notion of health has been self-evidently described as a symbol of moral performances. In the establishment of ‘good health’, people initiate reiterative sets of ritualized practices - in which athletic endeavours play a crucial role - to construct a viable identity (Williams, 1998 in Keane, 2009: 168).

In emphasizing physical fitness and capacity, people add “ritualistic imperatives of discipline and pleasure” to the concept of health (Williams, 1998: 450). Hence, according to Williams, health becomes a “prime site from which claims to social membership are demonstrated” (1998: 450). Following this line of reasoning, health represents the very essence of the dilemma of self-control, pain and transgression. Continual emphases on the equivalence between good health, good self and athleticism add heightened moral implications to athleticism, sports activities and fitness.

Moreover, institutionalized health interventions have been viewed as a solution not only to physical ailments but also to social morbidity (Broom & Tovey, 2009; Dean, 1997). Likewise, sports activities are socially regarded as a beneficial solution for promoting virtues such as morally outstanding individuals who are capable of self-discipline, controlled behaviours, abstinence, sociality and teamwork (Keane, 2009: 164; Ferron et al., 1999). Therefore, a person’s athleticism and exterior fitness typically represent a healthy and moral person with stamina, agility and competence (Keane, 2009: 164; Williams, 1998). Consequently, people, particularly athletically active men, tend to strive to present themselves as physically and morally ‘fit’ (Broom & Tovey, 2009; Courtenay, 2009; Crawford, 1984).
Athleticism and gender values

Studies indicate that people commit to sports activities or particular lifestyle behaviours to deal with their concerns regarding gendered identities. There is a view that contends that sports activities such as football and rugby are introduced in curricula for the early phases of compulsory national education to foster masculine qualities amongst children from early age (Leaman & Carrington, 1985). Other studies find that women who participate in sports maintain a higher level of self-esteem, more positive mood and less depression than those who do not (Mutrie and Biddle, 1995). Vealey (1988) argues that the source of the ‘positive’ self-concept of elite female athletes comes from the acquisition of ‘masculine’ traits that counterbalance feminine gender roles through athletic endeavours. Yet, at the same time, female athletes (and women in general) fear being criticized for lacking stereotypical femininity (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011).

Moreover, research indicates that men tend to engage in particular types of sport primarily to live up to a hegemonic masculine identity, which indicates physical aggression, impulse, determination, competitiveness, purposive desire for success, competitiveness etc. (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). However, men also use these activities in lifestyle behaviours to negotiate alternative elements of masculinity based on how they want to be perceived by others in specific social contexts (Courtenay, 2009). Therefore, people use lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours to regulate their understanding of self as gendered individuals (ibid.).

Athleticism and masculinity

Athleticism and sporting endeavours are typically linked to masculine values (Leaman & Carrington, 1985: 213; Broom & Tovey, 2009; Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Parker, 1996). While sport is widely regarded as being outside the dominant political and social institutions, the masculinized account of power and patriarchy that it promotes is central to the constitution of masculine values in society and political power. That is, the notion that sport “makes men out of boys” is still prevalent in social life (Hargreaves, 2000).

Accordingly, sport as an idealized practice of masculine power and privilege has profound social consequences outside the sporting arena (Sage, 1990). For example, various sporting disciplines tend to have a prominent place in the contemporary education of children, which is found to sustain and improve primarily male conduct (ibid.: 165). In the UK, for example, team sports played at school, such as football, rugby and cricket, are ways for boys (and girls) to learn necessary and prestigious manliness (Crossett, 1990; Keane, 2009; Parker, 1996).
Sports activities, athleticism and the physique of a male athlete are said to project typical masculine features such as power, physical strength, confidence and self-reliance (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Keane, 2009; Connell, 1987). Scholars have suggested that men also choose to establish divergent type of masculine expressions through engaging in different types of sporting activities (Courtenay, 2009). That is to say, despite the general notions about masculinity, men tend to pursue different types of masculine qualities in choices of lifestyle behaviours and different types of sports (ibid.). For example, boxers are typically regarded as representing hegemonic masculine features with both their idealized body build and the aggressive nature of the sport. Football and rugby players are often seen as maintainers of male collaborative solidarity (Courtenay, 2009; Keane, 2009; Crawford, 1984).

Moreover, men appeal to “muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body” to express hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987: 85). According to Connell, “the meanings in the bodily sense of masculinity concern […] the superiority of men to women, and the exaltation of hegemonic masculinity over other groups of men which is essential to the domination of women” (ibid.: 85). Physical competitiveness, aggression, self-reliance and the self-disciplinary qualities of an athlete often project the image of a masculine man who constantly strives for success, winning and status in social life. Based on this general association, it has been argued that sports are the prime site for the construction and reproduction of masculinity; and they maintain male power and beliefs that are based on the “natural” attributes of the male body (Keane, 2009: 165; Messner, 1992).

Women in sport

Previous studies indicate that the cultural endorsement of body contact confrontational sport, the general acceptance of pain and injury and the ritualized sexism and homophobia in sporting activities are evidence of the association between sports, athleticism and the formation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Socially, a muscular body, along with the values of strength, competence, confidence, power and independence it conveys, is commonly thought to define masculinity (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011: 207). In sport, the image of female athletes’ bodies also approximates to the lean and fit societal ideal. However, it has been found that female athletes often experience higher levels of mental distress when they strive to maintain an athletic physique and simultaneously face contradicting conventional social expectations regarding their image outside of sports, which is stereotypically regarded as soft, calm and caring. (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). Based on these notions, Leaman and
Carrington (2006) argue that excessive emphases on athletic values in a society contribute to intensifying existing stereotypes of the image of men and women and thereby reproduce gender marginality in that society.

It is within such a context, research on women who are interested in sport often seeks to explain their deviant behaviours. This is to outline the price which sportswomen are obliged to pay for rejecting socially imposed standards of femininity (Leaman, 1984; Leaman & Carrington, 1985). Moreover, it has been suggested that men commit to extreme physical exercise while dismissing the physical need for rest mainly to sustain masculinity, power, position and prestige (Courtenay, 2009: 23); whereas some women tend to use their engagement in athletic activities to obtain an equally legitimized social status comparable to that of their male peers (Leaman & Carrington, 1985). Yet, the struggle of women is said typically caused by constant identity bewilderment when they confront the fabricated ‘necessary’ masculine attributes with the conventional view of femininity. Hence, women are more likely encounter confrontational notions in terms of making choices on doing sports.

**Sport and social class**

Pierre Bourdieu, in his work on sport and social class (1978), has elaborated extensively on the connection between engagement in sport and indications of distinctive social status. Bourdieu’s work (1978) indicates that the choice of sport is a way for social actors to maintain and express their belongingness to a certain social status. For example, the practice of some sports, such as tennis, riding, sailing or golf doubtless owes part of their ‘interest’, to their distinguishing function in terms of social status amongst participants (1978: 828).

Bourdieu further suggests that taking part in a sport is “a technique of sociability”. That is, it is a way social actors enact their bodies as signs to demonstrate habits, manners and movements that represent the distinctive characteristics that belong to a particular social class (1978: 839). People are capable of recognizing similarities with and distinctions between each other in social life through observing diverse sociability skills.

Scholars who are particularly interested in the recent development of the “gym culture and fitness frenzy” in Sweden (e.g. Ulseth & Seippel, 2011) have studied the effect of culture and life-style on social inequality in the fitness centres in post-industrial societies. These authors find that people’s choices of types of sport, or whether to participate in sports at all, are still closely associated with gender, age educational level and socio-economic status.
Bourdieu (1978, 1984) states that all cultural behaviours, including leisure and sporting behaviours, require the appropriate preferences and tastes, as well as skills and knowledge, which belong to particular social classes. And he terms sporting prowess and skills, as well as other distinctive tastes in leisure activities, as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984). Hence, it is possible that people enact their interpretations of experiences in leisure and/or sporting activities and athletic endeavours to express their understanding about themselves as a member of a social class through demonstrating cultural capital, including institutional privileges and status that belong exclusively to that social class.

2.1.2 Athleticism at the workplace

In organizational studies, scholars have begun to incorporate sociological understanding about the notion of sport and athleticism in their analysis of the wellness programmes at the workplace (Cederström, 2011; Zoller, 2003, 2005; Kelly, et al., 2012). Researchers have found that sport and athleticism have become a central theme in the communicative materials in many workplaces where wellness programmes are widely promoted (Zoller, 2005; 2010; Kelly et. al., 2012; Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011). They also point out that the obsession of the physical mastery that is characterized by active engagement in sports activities, by participation in competitions, and by demonstrating physical and mental strength in reference to elite athletes, is beginning to penetrate the “life world” of employees (Zoller, 2005; 2010; Kelly et. al., 2012).

In the workplace where health promotion programmes lie in the centre of the organizational culture health factors are seen as being particularly influential for major organizational outcomes such as stress management, presenteeism, absenteeism, efficiency and productivity (Zoller, 2003; 2005; Conrad & Walsh, 1992; Quick et al., 2007). It has been asserted that the positive effects of good health contribute to employee well-being in terms of confidence, optimism, hope and self-efficacy (Conrad & Walsh, 1992). Based on these assumptions, many organizations promote wellness programmes in the workplace through encouraging employees to engage in sports activities (Kelly et al., 2007; Zoller, 2005; 2010).

Scholars have also argued that athletic values in health promotion programmes contribute to the formation of a new corporate health ethic (Conrad & Walsh, 1992; Zoller, 2003; 2005; Kelly et al., 2002). When employees strive to achieve ‘healthy objectives’ that are designated by their employers, they thereby shape subjectivities regarding their bodies, and they engage in constant identity work to become “corporate athletes” (Kelly et al., 2002).
Studies suggest that employees become increasingly conscious about their lifestyle behaviours, and the appearance and the physical capacity of their bodies while adapting to the wellness programmes (Zoller, 2003; 2010; Kelly et al., 2002). Health promotion programmes as such are found not only to create behavioural references for employees, but also to outline new moral codes and a value basis both for the organization and employees in the name of health (Zoller, 2003, 2010; Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011; Cederström, 2011; Johansson et al., 2017).

In short, viewing social interpretations of athleticism as a powerful yet subtle and non-dogmatic form of regulative force, scholars in organizational studies highlight the managerial implications that have emerged in communicative discourses. Based on this, they begin to observe and analyze how such a subtle form of imperative notion imposes disciplinary meanings on employees’ sense of identity at the workplace.

2.2 Leaders in sport

Previous sections of literature review indicate that social interpretations of sporting behaviours and athleticism interplay with prevailing values in a society and in the workplace. People engage in athletic endeavours not only to obtain heightened physical mastery, but also to negotiate and express their social landscapes in terms of important values that concern them as gendered individuals, their social status and class. Scholars have also payed attention to examining social effects of athletic endeavours on individuals in work organizations (e.g. Zoller, 2003; 2005; 2010; Kelly et al., 2002). They suggest that overt emphases on athleticism in the collective health management in the workplace enlist individuals into the exhaustive “identity work” (Zoller, 2003; 2010; Kelly et al., 2002).

The notions of athleticism and being sporty have inevitably penetrated into leadership studies, too. In leadership studies, sporting activities have been theorized in various ways. In this part of the literature, I provide a general view of how sporty managers/executives have been portrayed through different theoretical lens in the extant literature. Through studying previous literature, I summarize three major themes that deal with the notion of athleticism in leadership studies. First, the functional approach commonly theorizes sporty prowess and athleticism as a self-evident positive attribute of a ‘good leader’ and of effective leadership. Second, the research that takes the CMS (Critical Management Studies) viewpoint devotes itself to problematizing the alleged ‘positive effect’ of sporty leaders. Third, some
scholars are beginning to touch upon the linkage between sport, athleticism and the formation of leaders’ sense of self.

In the following section, I introduce different insights from previous leadership studies following the aforementioned themes; and I point out the oversight - that concerns manners in which leaders enact the social interpretation of meanings of athleticism to negotiate their social landscapes and to construct their sense of self - that remains in the leadership studies.

2.2.1 Prescribing athleticism as a positive attribute of a ‘good leader’

Aiming to prescribe ultimate measures that bring about ‘peak performances’, Loehr and Schwartz propose an athletic approach for leaders in “The Making of Corporate Athletes” (2001). They argue that leaders ought to acquire athletic qualities such as endurance, strength, flexibility, self-control and focus so that they can bring the “mind, body and spirit to peak condition” (ibid.: 120). The authors claim that the “making of corporate athletes’ is a way leaders can ensure they bring the mind, body and spirit to its “peak condition” in any challenges that they may encounter (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001: 120).

This approach emphasizes the importance of athletic ability in leadership. Studies following this approach mainly aim to bring about the enhanced efficiency and efficacy of a leader through promoting athletic values. This approach is thus similar to one of the earliest attempts in leadership, which is devoted to exploring positive personal attributes for ideal leaders. For example, scholars involved in developing trait theories (Stogdill, 1948) have extensively elaborated the kind of psychological and/or physiological attributes that may composite a “great man” (e.g. Locke, 2000). Recent research on leadership, which focuses on the notion of athleticism, seems to add physical mastery as an aspect of the ultimate trait of good leaders.

Leadership theories akin to this approach mainly seek to provide a delineation of idealized psychological, physiological and emotional attributes of leaders. For example, bringing forth the notion of athleticism, Loehr and Schwarz (2001) suggest that leaders gain positive attributes such as “vigour, persistence, originality, self-confidence, stress tolerance” (e.g. Yukl, 1981) through becoming “world class athletes”. Quick and colleagues (2007) suggest that leaders with outstanding levels of physical fitness are “the spark plug and key driving force that ignites the positive energy and enthusiasm of the vital, productive, and purposeful organization” (Quick et al., 2007: 190-191). They argue that there is a self-evident cause-effect relation between the physical fitness of leaders and well-being of employees as well as other
organizational outcomes such as stress management, presenteeism, absenteeism, efficiency and productivity (Quick et al., 2007).

Studies that theorize lifestyle behaviours such as athletic behaviours as instrumental solutions in the ‘making’ of ‘good leaders’ prescribe lifestyle factors as a new source of personal attributes for occupants of the leadership role. Such an approach extends the conventional understanding of leaders and leadership to private life domains. They suggest that in order to become a good leader and to practise leadership efficiently, one needs to ‘perform’ both inside and outside the workplace.

Furthermore, studies that focus on prescribing instrumental effects of athleticism tend to overlook the actual process in which leaders experience athletic endeavours in order to achieve alleged positive effects (Sinclair, 2005a). On this point, Sinclair argues that excessive prescriptive writings on physical mastery and aesthetic control in leadership may create a “prison” for leaders (Sinclair, 2005a: 389). For example, some corporate executives report that they experience they are being judged in terms of reduced leadership competence when they display any sign of illness or ailments. Other high-profile executives are said to be “seriously occupied” with the concerns of image-building (Roberts et al., 2005).

Finally, it has been suggested that promoting body management and control amongst leaders intensifies the obsessions in a society culturally preoccupied with the masculine quest for perfect bodies and age-defying fixes (Sinclair, 2005a: 390). Hence, instead of following instrumental approaches, researchers have begun to be more attentive to examining the process in which leaders actually enact their athletic endeavours in leadership approaches (e.g. Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b; Thanem, 2013).

2.2.2 Athleticism in leadership practices

While some leadership research prescribes athleticism as a major source of desired qualities for a leader and as the generator of positive effects in organizational outcomes, other studies devote themselves to scrutinizing actual consequences of the enactment of passions in an athletic lifestyle in leadership performances (e.g. Thanem, 2013). For example, taking a critical analytical view on the ‘leaders in sport’, Thanem reveals the ‘dark side’ of sporty and lifestyle oriented leaders.

By focusing on the reactions of followers, Thanem’s empirical study (2013) reveals that leaders who excessively emphasize lifestyle factors and enact passions in a sporty lifestyle in leadership approaches are perceived as
uncharismatic. Instead of being empowered, followers report being “de-motivated” by the sporty, lifestyle-oriented leaders (Thanem, 2013). With regard to this finding, Thanem explains that when followers perceive leaders are transgressing the conventional concept of leadership and beginning to address issues that are normally understood as being outside the domain of work-related activities, they do not respond positively to the leaders’ “charisma”. Thanem thereby argues that a leader who enacts passions in particular lifestyle behaviours “disrupts and exceeds the formally and socially defined limits of their leadership role”; and that this henceforth leads to undesired consequences (Thanem, 2013: 397).

Furthermore, in my own master thesis, I studied a group of sporty top managers who turn their athletic endeavours into managerial slogans at the workplace and thereby aiming to “lead beyond the body and mind”8. These studies extensively problematize the broadly accepted notion that athleticism is a positive attribute of a ‘good leader’. The critical insights shed light on understanding the phenomenon of ‘leaders in sports’. It reminds us that leaders’ passion in lifestyle behaviours ought not to be taken as self-evident positive attribute either in leadership or in the building of an image of a ‘good leader’.

2.2.3 Athleticism and the formation of the sense of self as leaders

Recently, organizational scholars have begun to address the linkage between athletic endeavours and the formation of leaders’ sense of self. Most of the studies take a similar approach to theorize social meanings that reside in the notion of sport and athleticism as a new form of regulative force that disciplines the formation of leaders’ sense of self and identity (Maravelias, 2015; Johansson et al., 2017; Zoller, 2003; Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011).

For example, Maravelias (2015) argues that corporate executives who commit to athletic lifestyles tend to use the activities to prove their competitiveness as leaders and “elevated work ethics” that are attached to the notion of leadership. According to Maravelias (2015), the emergence of an increasing number of athletic leaders is the outcome of “post-disciplinary technical arrangements” (2015: 281). That is, the notion of becoming physically competitive has replaced formal managerial disciplines; and it is beginning to enlist corporate elites to pursue becoming ever more physically fit, stronger, and faster to sustain competitiveness as leaders. The author thereby asserts

that the enhanced athleticism and competitiveness amongst business leaders is an outcome of increasingly invisible neoliberal managerial pressure (ibid.). Aiming primarily to elaborate the non-dogmatic form of regulative managerial notions in the neoliberalist era, with his work, Maravelias points out an important linkage between leaders’ athleticism and their sense of self as members of the network of corporate elites (2015).

Furthermore, in a recently published article, I, together with my colleagues, tackle cultural meanings that reside in discourses of health, fitness and sports, that of management, and of gender in an approach of theorizing athleticism as a “regulative regime that provides norms that define the legitimate bodily identities” of some top managers in the workplace (Johansson, Tienari & Valtonen, 2017:2). Inspired by the increasing research attention on the passionate preoccupation with the body, and viewing such a fixation on physical mastery as a new form of identity regulation, we identified ways that sporty managers perform bodily identity through adhering to the norms that are being inscribed by the ‘regulative regime’ of managerial athleticism. This article goes further to indicate that social interpretations of lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours exert imperative forces and contribute to the formation of the sense of self and the corporeality of leaders at the workplace (e.g. Kelly, Allender, & Colquhoun, 2007; Johansson et al., 2017; Johansson, 2013).

The aforementioned works that address the linkage between leaders’ athletic endeavours and the formation of their sense of self assume that social interpretations of athleticism function as a new form of discursive regulative force. This theoretical assumption takes discursive practices as the major sources of self-meanings and allocates individuals’ sense of self as a mere ‘objective’ of the regulative social discourse. Without deliberate preclusion of individual creativity, these studies tend to imply that the formation of the sense of self as leader is an outcome of the subjugation of the changing form of managerial disciplines. This theoretical standpoint does indeed facilitate scholarly works to reveal the emergence of an ‘invisible’ form of coercive forces that has come to discipline the formation of the sense of self of leaders through controlling their daily practices, and it thereby illuminating the understanding of leaders’ sporting activities from an unique angle.

Nonetheless, while providing profound insights on the phenomenon of ‘leaders in sport’, extant studies tend to overlook subtle details about how leaders, as social actors, interpret their experiences in sports activities, and how they use such interpretations as self-expressions to convey who they are or whom they want to be. The self of the ‘leaders in sport’ illustrated this way is thus merely socially burdened, but lacks an “intimate”, personal touch and
misses the interpersonal link (Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Ford et al., 2008, Beech, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009).

The implication about the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours and the formation of their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role has nevertheless largely intrigued my research interests for this thesis. Building on this implication, I am determined to unpack this linkage with a new theoretical angle. I attempt to conduct a thorough scrutiny of how sporty managers, executives and corporate elites interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to create and convey important values and beliefs for their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective. Before proposing the new theoretical standpoint for this research, in the following section, I introduce the competing views in the research on the formation of leaders’ sense of self.

2.3 Understanding the formation of the sense of self of leaders

In leadership studies, the research on the formation of the sense of self or identity of leaders has been a major attribute for the scholarly understanding of leadership and leaders. Studies with the focus on leaders’ sense of self or identity to a large extent embrace the assumption that people anchor the construction of identity in the basic need for positive self-esteem in relation to one’s social role (Turner, 1982; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979; Serpe & Stryker, 1987; Stryker, 1968). That is, people (and leaders) strive for an identity ‘prototype’ which they believe strengthens their self-certainty (Hogg, Martin, & Weeden, 2003).

While many leadership scholars aim to explore positive elements in ‘prototypical’ identity ‘constructs’ for leaders and aim to help them to engender followers’ support, trust, motivation and loyalty (Hogg, Martin, & Weeden, 2003), other researchers focus on the process where identity emerges through self-reflexive activities (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Beech, 2008; Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2008).

In social life, people use expressions (both verbal and non-verbal) to convey their understanding of the self to present an “infallible self” (Becker, 1974: 59; Goffman, 1959). In social interactions, we talk about our feelings and emotions, interpret our experiences of particular events or behaviours, or act in certain ways to convey important values, beliefs and concerns to control others’ impressions of ourselves (Schlenker, 1980, 1985, 2012; Becker, 1974;
Goffman, 1959). Hence, the presentation of one’s understanding of self is primarily associated with self-expressions such as linguistic and other forms of performative devices (ibid.). Many leadership studies also anchor the analyses in leaders’ reflexive self-expressions. Yet there are competing views on self-expressions, and different approaches to the analysis of self-expressions in the formation of leaders’ sense of self in the current state of leadership studies.

2.3.1 The focus on the ‘discursive regulation’

In leadership studies, some scholars who are devoted to investigating the formation of leaders’ identity have largely embraced the notion that the self is an “expressive device” (e.g. Becker, 1974: 59). That is, scholars examine primarily what leaders say and do as indicative devices of their understanding of selves or identities (Becker, 1974; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Many studies have anchored the analysis of the formation of leaders’ identity in self-narratives and other types of expressive performances (e.g. Down & Reveley, 2009). For example, according to Svenningsson and Larsson, managers who want to become “strategists, visionaries, and entrepreneurs” internalize such “identity fantasy” descriptions by “talking” themselves into this role identity through articulating identity narratives that are accordant with dominant leadership discourses that are available. This study indicates that leaders interpret their actions at work in accordance with an available leadership discourse, and they create and convey their identity fantasies in self-expressions (Svenningsson & Larsson, 2006). Other scholars have found that although managers’ actions decouple the role description at times, they still tend to convince themselves and others in the verbally expressive identity-work whereby they ‘frame’ an image of themselves that adheres to the overarching identity discourse (Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2003).

Furthermore, Thomas and Linstead (2002) explore that leaders enact self-narratives to anchor their identity in the changing world. For example, in a managerial context where change is regarded as the central issue, managers produce self-narratives that illustrate them as either “expert” or “different” to adapt to the available leadership discourse and appear to be authoritative in “changing” situations (Thomas & Linstead, 2002; Beech, 2008). Such self-narratives are found in sync with what has been suggested in the prevailing leadership discourse in the given context.

The aforementioned works on the formation of leaders’ identity have rendered many insights about self-expressions as important accounts in understanding the construction of identity. Yet, these studies share a common theoretical
notion. That is, prevailing leadership concepts or available managerial discourses (such as Change Management, Total Quality Management etc.) serve as a major source of self-meanings in these studies, which constantly enlist managers, supervisors or executives into exhausting identity work that involves adjustments in self-narratives as well as performances (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson, 2010; Alvesson & Spicer, 2011).

This theoretical notion is largely in line with Alvesson and Willmott (2002)’s proposal on identity regulation, in which they write: “identity is sustained through identity work in which regulation is accomplished by selectively, but not necessarily reflectively, adopting practices and discourses that are more or less intentionally targeted at the ‘insides’ of employees, including managers” (2002: 627). Hence, the ‘self-expressions’ that are selected and taken as the accounts for the construction of identities amongst these supervisors, managers and corporate executives are often ‘socially burdened’ and constrained within the workplace.

2.3.2 An interactive view on the formation of self

Many scholars in the stream of research on leaders’ identity or their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role have begun to oppose the view that the formation of leaders’ sense of self is the direct outcome of “figments of discourse” of dominant leadership notions (Casey, 2000: 66; Sinclair, 2005a, 2013; Ford et al., 2008). These scholars argue that the process in which people form their senses of self in different social context is an ongoing, ever changing and fleeting process that interweaves in a mundane flux of daily experiences (Ford et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2013). This suggests that people seek to allocate their sense of self within a frame where personal desire, interpersonal demands and socially acknowledged values and beliefs are temporarily in equilibrium. This way people convey an understanding of self that is meaningful in personal, interpersonal and social dimensions (Schlenker, 1980; Ford et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

Scholars go further and argue that the process of formation of self is both an “intimate” and interactive process (e.g. Beech, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009). Leaders are like any other social actors; they make sense of current states of being through expressing self-narratives by relating to historical events, to the situation and the state of mind they are in now, and the personal “fantasies” they seek to fulfil (Ford, Harding & Learmonth, 2011; Ford et al., 2008). As Watson (2008) states, “We can come to understand better the ways in which individuals generally strive to come to terms with a changing world, sometimes relatively actively, sometimes relatively passively” (2008: 140).
On this note, Watson argues that while acknowledging the force of discourse, identity researchers should not narrow their attention to focus solely on prevailing leadership discourses, but the research ought to go deeper than the surface of narrative expressions and to reveal what is really going on inside the person (2008). That is, occupants of the leadership role may come to conform or reject some socially acknowledged leadership notions through reflecting upon personally held values; they may also choose to embrace or neglect responses of others depending on their understanding of situational characteristics in different circumstances (e.g. Beech, 2008: 72; Ford et al., 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009).

Hence, studying how leaders form their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role demands that the researcher pay attention to a much broader scope of self-expressions that reflect a wider range of information. The researcher must thus pay attention to how individuals make sense of what they do, the situation in which they are embedded, their understanding of the role they occupy, and so forth; and to examine how they relate to the aforementioned thoughts to convey important values, beliefs or concerns to address ‘who they are’ and ‘whom they want to become’.

Following this line of thought, with an interactionist approach, Beech (2008) has made some breakthrough by using an ‘alternative’ source of self-meaning in his analysis of the formation of a manager’s identity. Beech (2008) applies a dialogic model to explain the way a manager manoeuvres meaning-making activities in the identity construction in a multi-discursive context. With this dialogic model, he illustrates how the manager initiates an internal dialogue to negotiate his position between the input of external discourses and output of internal identity stimuli (2008:55).

Beech’s study (2008) draws attention to the role of the leader’s non-professional self-identification in the evaluation of what is being expected from him/her. The study reveals that managers come to identify themselves based on an interactive dialogue between the private sense of self and the external identity stimuli. In this process, the manager’s own strong sense of self-identification on a “pro-art/anti-commerce” stance (ibid.: 59) is at times found to ‘interfere’ with his/her identity construction as a manager. The self-identity narration shifts between the identification of a musician and that of a manager depending upon the perceived expectations. Yet Beech points out that managers may even lean towards their non-professional self-identification at times, even it does not reward them with career elevation.

Moreover, Beech also finds that the managers react to the responses of others when formulating their own self-narratives. Down and Reveley (2009)’s study also indicates that managers seek “narrative identity anchor points in the self-
verifying responses of co-present others” (2009: 397). This explains that leaders incorporate the responses of others as source of self-meanings in a selective and self-verifying manner with or without the presence of others.

In the same study, authors also embraced performances in the analysis of formation of leaders’ identities (Down & Reveley, 2009). Inspired by Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to social life in the study of a first-line supervisor at a restructured Australian industrial plant, Down and Reveley (2009) explain that “singly, neither self-narration nor dramaturgical performance accounts for the practical discursive work that constructs managerial ‘identity’”. Rather, the authors find that self-narration and dramaturgical performance are “seamlessly interwoven” in the process where managers construct their identities. Hence, not only do leaders formulate verbal self-narratives to be in tune with the leadership discourse, they also use performative expressions to strengthen the coherence of their image as a leader (in this case, as supervisors in an industrial plant) (Down & Reveley, 2009).

Beech and other scholars reaffirm that the formation of leaders’ identity or sense of self is a complex and iterative process (Beech, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009). It involves people’s evaluation of the situation, self and others in one integrated process. Beech therefore urges leadership researchers to conduct thorough examinations on the “intimate” identity construction process (2008: 72). In other words, researchers need to pay attention to leaders’ self-narratives or performances that address not only prevailing values in available leadership discourses but also those that articulate self-interests, and relational concerns in the process of identity construction (Furnham, 2005).

2.3.3 Understanding leaders’ sense of self beyond the formal managerial discourses and work settings

Moreover, most of the current studies on the formation of leaders’ identity or sense of self primarily conduct their research within organizational settings and focus on examining self-expressions in work-related behaviours. These studies analyze individuals’ self-narratives that are mostly found in formal managerial behaviours. This implies that leaders construct their identities as occupants of the professional role only within the workplace.

Responding to the lack of research attention on leaders’ behaviours outside the formal work setting, Sinclair argues that we are able to gain new knowledge about the occupants of the leadership role if we understand meanings that emerge in individuals’ self-expressions such as articulation of
actual feelings, senses and emotions. With this, she encourages scholars to pay more attention to how individuals generate meanings - by interpreting their experience in activities that are both formal and informal, both inside and outside the workplace - to address ‘who they are’ and to pronounce wishful notions on ‘whom they want to become’ as the occupant of the leadership role. Thus the self that is ‘gazed upon’ this way contains expressions of personally held values, private feelings, emotions, or interpersonal tensions; and it may reflect either resistant attitude, struggles, bewilderment or willingness in terms of conformity to social norms (Ford et al., 2008).

Following this notion, with a study on “A material dean” (2013), Sinclair constructs an extensive description of a female dean in the form of “creative narratives” in a fiction style of writing. This creative writing captures the flows of mundane bodily movements of a female dean in her daily encounters. With this study, the author brings about the dramatic and fictional accounts of the dean’s approaches to leadership. Sinclair argues that conventional writing about leaders within the organizational borders fixes the image of leaders in their institutional function. An alternative observation of leaders may thus render comprehensive understanding of these individuals beyond the work setting. According to Sinclair, this may free people’s (readers’) imagination about these leaders, so they may come to perceive leaders as living beings with feelings and emotions; and their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role may then spill outside the rigid work settings (Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b, 2013).

Leaders are a group of people who occupy an important institutional role in the workplace. Yet they are living beings who maintain diverse personal attributes and seek to express individualized values, emotions and feelings (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993; Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Ford et al., 2008). Scholars have therefore suggested that research ought to anchor analysis in what they actually say and do both inside and outside the workplace, and portray the formation of understanding of self of these individuals by embracing information about these individuals that is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful (e.g. Sinclair, 2013).

2.4 The aim of this research

In social contexts, people engage in sporty activities not only for maintaining enhanced physical mastery, but also for moulding an ‘infallible’ self-image. Previous sections of literature review render both insights on the phenomenon of ‘leaders in sport’ and some important inspirations for this research. The literature indicates that recent studies on leadership have begun to explain the
linkage between lifestyle behaviours in athletic endeavours and leaders’ sense of self. These studies mainly regard social interpretations of sport and athleticism as a non-dogmatic form of regulative regime that impose coercive forces upon the formation of leaders’ senses of selves. Nonetheless, extant leadership studies place little emphasis on how sporty managers/executives interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours, and how they actively use these interpretations to convey important values, beliefs to comprise the understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role. The oversight of individuals’ agentic actions may lead to a misconception about the formation of the sense of self of leaders as a merely ‘socially burdened’ process.

Furthermore, by reflecting upon the competing views in leadership studies that focus on the formation of leaders’ sense of self, I intend with this study to participate in the ongoing discussions in the research on the formation of leaders’ sense of self. I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of ‘leadership in sport’ by applying an interactive view on the formation of the sense of self, and by looking into leaders’ self-expressions that are beyond the formal work-related behaviours.

Based on this literature review, I arrive at the aim of my study on the sporty managers/executives. This study aims to unpack the linkage between lifestyle behaviours in athletic endeavours and the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective. In other words, this thesis investigates how sporty top managers enact self-expressions to interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to create and express important values, beliefs and/or concerns to convey their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role.

The term ‘self-expressions’ refers to verbal expressions and other types of expressive performances that the top managers enact to convey understanding of self as “infallible” occupants of the leadership role (Becker, 1974: 59; Goffman, 1959). In this study, I focus on analysing utterances and actions of sporty managers/executives that contain aspirations about “who they are” and/or “whom they want to be”; their evaluations of others, as well as their understanding of the social situation (leadership context).

2.5 Theoretical assumptions

In order to unpack the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours and their sense of self as the occupant of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective, this study holds two theoretical assumptions. First, this study adopts a symbolic interactionist view of individuals’ sense of self. This view
construes individuals (leaders) as meaning-agents who act upon things for the meanings residing in them; and who are capable of creating new nuances of self-meanings by interpreting their experience, in particular behaviours, through relating these experiences to the understanding of a social role they occupy (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Stryker, 2008; Stryker & Statham, 1985; Turner, 1978).

Second, relating to the first theoretical assumption, this study holds the view that people interpret their experiences in behaviours based on meanings that reside in these behaviours, and they use their interpretations to negotiate their social landscapes and express important values that compose an imaginative view about themselves (Lee & Cockman, 1995; Leary, 1992). Therefore, we need to understand that lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours are expressive of people’s sense of self in social life (Broom & Tovey, 2009).

2.5.1 A symbolic interactionist view

This study rests upon a symbolic interactionist world view. That is, this study holds the view that leaders, like all social actors, are meaning-agents who are capable of creating new nuances of self-meanings as occupants of a particular social role (Denzin, 1992; Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980; McCall & Simmons, 1966). Viewing individuals as creative entities, symbolic interactionist theorists do not preclude any influences of the existing social meanings in things (or behaviours) on people’s sense of selves. Rather, this theoretical view acknowledges the impact of socially recognized “meaning-frames” on the formation of individuals’ sense of self. Yet, at the same time, this view also projects individuals as creative and self-reflexive beings who actively define their own positions, and make new nuances of self-meanings in social interactions based on the existing ‘meaning frames’ (Mead, 1934; Denzin, 1992). That is to say, that by organizing utterances and managing their actions, people express particular values, beliefs and goals that are vital to a sense of self that is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful (Schlenker, 1980; Goffman, 1959; Cooley, 1922; Weigert & Gecas, 2005).

Furthermore, symbolic interactionist theorists conceptualize the self as both the effect and driving force of the external world (Mead, 1934; Denzin, 1992). This theoretical view construes people as meaning-agents in the sense that we are capable of ‘objectifying’ the self in social actions while creating new nuances of self-meanings in our experiences in social actions (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1959; Denzin, 1992). In other words, people, while striving to become ‘who they ought to be’ by relating to the social role they occupy, they tend to uphold some notions that are intrinsically meaningful for themselves.
According to some theorists in this stream of thought, the concept of self is divided into the notion of ‘I’ and ‘me’. The “I”, for Mead, “is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation that is within the experience of the individual”, hence, is personally meaningful (1934: 177). The “me” is the social self, the organized set of reflexivity that “I” have undertaken in order to communicate, direct, judge, identify in social interactions (Mead, 1934; 174). It is because of “I”, the active and impulsive nature of self, Mead states, that we are to some extent untouched by external control. Hence, we are unique, creative and distinguishable from others (Mead, 1934; 174). The formation of self that contains constant on-going dialogical reflexivity between “I” and “me” is hence a complex process that involves meaning-generation on personal, interpersonal and social dimensions.

Based on this view of ‘self’, symbolic interactionists acknowledge that social actors are meaning-agents who are capable of creating new nuances of self-meanings. Social actors undertake self-reflexivity - by listening to inner voices of self-aspirations, relating to what they do in daily life, who they were historically, and how they relate to others etc. - to compose an understanding of the self as occupants of a social role in the present state.

Hence, this view allows the researcher to scrutinize self-expressive processes in which people relate their experience in a mundane flow of experiences in daily life to their understanding of selves as occupants of a social role. In other words, this view allows the research to investigate utterances and actions that are conventionally regarded as ‘irrelevant’ to their sense of self as occupant of particular social roles, and to extract meanings that are indirectly associated with the understanding of self. The ‘making’ of self viewed through theoretical lens as such is hence individually unique, interpersonally relevant and socially recognizable (Sinclair, 2005a, Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2008; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker, 1980; Goffman, 1959).

Moreover, people occupy multiple roles in social life. Yet when a person perceives a certain social role to be more significant in her life, she will imagine herself being ‘on the play’ at all times (e.g. McCall and Simmons, 1966; Weigert & Gecas, 2005). In such a circumstance, the person may intend to create self-meanings that strengthen her image as the occupant of a particular social role. Therefore, she may attempt to interpret her experience of this engagement in particular social actions in ways that add positive attributes to support her image of self as the occupant of a significant social role. In a symbolic interactionist view, human beings are particularly capable
of selectively “objectifying” the self and intentionally fostering an appropriate image of that self (Goffman, 1959).

From the symbolic interactionist viewpoint, not only are social actors capable of choosing to ‘objectify’ the self in a particular way when addressing their sense of self as occupants of a social role, they are also able to create particular imaginative views based on their personal interests as an attribute in the imaginative view of the self (McCall & Simmons, 1966). For example, an artistic leader may try to incorporate meanings of art as part of a necessary attribute in the imaginative view as a leader (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1966). Hence, theories in this stream do not reduce human actors’ understanding of self as mere products of one type of socially dominant discursive practices within organizational settings. Rather, people are viewed as agentic in terms of composing new self-meanings as the occupant of a particular social role through linking their understanding of self with their assessments of different social encounters (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Schlenker, 1980; 1985).

2.5.2 Sport, athletic endeavours and self-expressions

Based on the first theoretical assumption, when viewing social actors in both subject and object positions in social processes and in the formation of the sense of self, it is also crucial to understand that behaviours people choose to engage in are to a great extent expressive of meanings about themselves. At the beginning of this chapter, the literature review has summarized some insights into the notion of athleticism in sociological studies. These studies suggest that lifestyle behaviours such as sports and athletic endeavours are self-expressive behaviours with which people establish enhanced values with regard to themselves in social life (Broom & Tovey, 2009; Turner, 1984; Kirk & Tinning, 1994).

People generally want others to view them in desirable ways. We maintain physical mastery through constantly moulding the appearance and capabilities of our bodies to present a self-image that conveys ‘appropriate’ meanings of the self in social life (Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1984). For example, a competitive athlete may seek to present him or herself through an image that ‘fleshes out’ their tireless efforts and heightened competence in infinite pursuit of winning and success (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). The same image seems also to be persuasive of work-related competences in their professional areas (ibid.).

Moreover, Leary (1992) finds that people engage in athletic endeavours in different ways, based on self-presentational needs, to enhance their sense of self-esteem, self-confidence etc. This implies that athleticism and engagement
in athletic endeavours is highly associated with people’s self-concepts. The literature review at the beginning of this chapter has indicated that social actors engage in athletic endeavours not only to maintain enhanced physical mastery, but also to negotiate a social landscape for themselves in social life. That is, they enact their experiences in sporting activities to express a value basis of their sense of self as gendered individuals, to manifest self-disciplinary qualities, aesthetic values, moral stance, and to articulate belongingness to a social class (Courtenay, 2009; Keane, 2009; Bourdieu, 1990; Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Kirk & Tinning, 1994).

People follow particular behavioural routines in sports to express significant values that relate to the social meanings that are associated with sports and athleticism to demonstrate their understanding of self (Lee & Cockman, 1995). They convey socially acknowledgeable aesthetic values of body image, gender stereotypes, social status, class belongingness, and power or successfulness. These self-expressions through athletic endeavours are vital to the formation of their sense of self in social life (Leary, 1992). Hence, lifestyle behaviours such as engagement in fitness or athletic endeavours are self-expressive behaviours through which people convey the understanding of an imaginative view of themselves in social life.

Based on this assumption, when investigating how the sporty managers form their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role through interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours, I intend to revisit the existing notions on social interpretations of athleticism and sporty endeavours. At the same time, I keep an open mind towards the emergence of any creative notions about athleticism and athletic endeavours.

Finally, in order to fulfil the research aim, and to obtain sufficient knowledge about the ways in which the sporty leaders interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to create and express self-meanings, within the symbolic interactionist conceptual frame, I apply theories of self-presentation to give a thorough investigation into their self-expressions.

In line with the symbolic interactionist view on self, self-presentation theories facilitate this study with both theoretical directions and interpretive analytical toolkits. Studies on the self-presentation mainly focus on highlighting social actors’ self-expressions with which they create and mobilize the expressiveness of symbols, languages and stories to interpret their behaviours and to convey values and beliefs that are vital to their sense of self (Mead, 1934; Edgley, 2003: 143; Charon, 1989; Schlenker, 1980). In the next chapter, I introduce theories of self-presentation, and thereafter I formulate research questions for this study that are derived from core assumptions of theories of self-presentation.
3. Theories of self-presentation

From a symbolic interactionist point of view, people learn to play different roles in social life and take on elements of the sense of self that is related to the role they play (McCall & Simmons, 1962). We engage in ‘role play’ to present an imaginative view of self that is often ‘little better’ than who we actually are in order to maintain heightened self-esteem (Mead, 1934; Schenker, 1980; Goffman, 1959; Burke, 1962). Through these experiences, we label others, the social situation, and ourselves. Dramaturgical theories of self-presentation follow the symbolic interactionist view on the notion of self, and construes that the formation of self is a process that emerges in constant self-reflexive behaviours that relate to one’s social encounters (Schlenker, 1980; McCall & Simmons, 1962; Charon, 1989).

In social life, when people worry that they are behaving ‘differently’ from a conventional point of view (that relates to a social role), they tend to create new “meanings” and “labels” about themselves by using various self-expressions in self-presentational strategies (Goffman, 1959; 1974). As a result, they do not only ensure self-esteem as the occupant of that role, but they may also be able to add new nuances of meanings to an imaginative view of themselves as the occupants of the social role (McCall & Simmons, 1962).

Therefore, by playing our roles, through constant interactions with our social encounters, and by striving for adhering to an idealized image of ourselves, we attribute new nuances of meanings in the social reality in which we are situated. This way, we also change the society (e.g. Mead, 1934). Hence, self-presentational practices contain profound informational cues that are expressive of not only personal values, beliefs held by social actors, but also how they transform individualize aspirations into socially recognizable ‘meaning-frames’ (Mead, 1934; McCall & Simmons, 1962).

In this chapter, I introduce theories of self-presentation and the ways these theories may facilitate my research on the self-expressive aspect of leaders’ engagement in athletic endeavours. Firstly, I explain the dramaturgical origin of the concept of self-presentation, following which I introduce different streams of thoughts in the existing research of self-presentation. Thereafter, I clarify how I intend to use these theories for my study. Secondly, I explain epistemological implications rendered by theories of self-presentation. That
is, self-presentation theories account for expressive performances that people
carry out to develop stories about themselves and to maintain expressive
control as the major source of knowledge about social processes. Thirdly,
based on important assumptions rendered by theories of self-presentation, and
drawing on the epistemological implications, I formulate four specific
research questions.

3.1 Self-presentation

The above quote by William Shakespeare has inspired many social scholars
in their attempts to theorize our daily behaviours in social life as performances
on the stage, which is believed to primarily serve the function of constructing
convincing self-image that fits the social role in which we engage (Burke,
1974; Cooley, 1922; McCall & Simmons, 1962). Amongst many scholars,
Burke proposed five major dramaturgical accounts of the meaningfulness of
human conduct (1974); McCall and Simmons developed theories of role-
identity (1962); Goffman theorizes our behaviours in daily life as the
expressive accounts of the presentation of self in different social situations
(e.g. 1959).

In social research, the dramaturgical perspective has its roots in the Symbolic
Interactionist school of thought. As a ‘sub-theory’ of this perspective,
dramaturgical theories ‘wrap’ social interaction in a theatrical framework
utilizing terms and concepts familiar to a dramatic production (Brissett &
Edgley, 1974). For example, using dramaturgical metaphor as a framework,
Goffman examines the structure of social interaction that emerges when
people are in one another's presence (1959).

3.1.1 Impression management and self-presentation

The term self-presentation is developed from Goffman’s dramaturgical study
“The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” which was published in 1959.
Goffman considers life as a stage for activity. By using dramaturgical
accounts, Goffman gives a description of the process of “human behaving” in
social life (Brissett and Edgley 1975. p. 4). Based on such a description,
Goffman explains how people engage in expressive performances to create the “idealized” image to others in public, which Goffman terms as “impression management.”

Furthermore, based on the notion of “impression management”, Schlenker (1980) defines self-presentation as the “attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980:6). For Schlenker (2012), to “survive and prosper in a social world, people must get others to form the ‘right’ impression about them, the things they are doing, and the things about which they care” (2012: 563). People achieve this goal through self-presentation (Schlenker, 2012: 563).

According to scholars in this stream of studies, self-presentation is expressive and informative of one’s identity (Collins, 2006; Leary, 1985; Schlenker, 1985). The study of the presentation of self focuses on the management of individual self-expressions that convey important values and beliefs about the understanding of self in the moment of interactions when people seek to present the self-image. This understanding of self may potentially play a crucial part in one’s identity depending on the circumstances and frequencies of the occurrence of the same type of interactions (Scott & Lane, 2000). Hence, for theorists in this vein of research, self-presentation is an expressive device of one’s identity, or identities.

Hence, studies on self-presentation are primarily interested in capturing the subtle manners in which people enact expressive accounts to “control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions” in the moment of their interactions with others (e.g. Schlenker, 1980: 6). Therefore, these studies mainly account for what has been said and done by social actors as the foundation for further interpretations of the understanding of selves in the moment of interactions. In order to avoid any confusion, in this thesis, I mainly use terms such as self, self-expressions, the understanding of self (i.e. selfhood) but not the term identity.

The root of the concept of ‘self-presentation’ or ‘impression management’ lies in the stream of thoughts in symbolic interactionism, which first argued that human behaviour was conditioned on the anticipated reactions of others (Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934). Based on this notion, Goffman suggests that people’s behaviours are like performances of actors on a stage, that are largely conducted for others in order to control impressions of themselves that serve the actors’ self-interests. Self-presentation is thus a goal-directed act designed, at least in part, to generate particular images of self and thereby influence how audiences perceive and treat the actor (Schlenker, 1980; 2012).
While emphasizing the role of others in the conduct of social actors’ sense of self, Goffman suggests that people manage their impressions of others mainly for addressing important values for themselves. He points out that the expressive performances people carry out in self-presentation have implications for the person’s understanding of self in that “in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves - the role we are striving to live up to - this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be” (Goffman, 1959: 19).

Hence, the type of impression an actor seeks to create projects values, beliefs and goals that the person aspires to live up to and convey to others as the basis of an idealized representation of the self. In this process, instead of being reactive to actual evaluations of others, social actors incorporate their own imaginative view of others’ expectation of themselves. Thus, self-presentation is more than a social and interpersonal process; it is also primarily ‘self-relevant’ (e.g. Schlenker, 1980:6).

Although scholars have used the terms impression management and self-presentation interchangeably, there are diverse views within existing research on self-presentation. Some scholars study self-presentation by focusing mainly on how people attempt to foster impressions in the eyes of others (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1986; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). These studies try to capture the expressive behaviours of actors when they respond to actual views or voices of the “similar expressive” others (e.g. Brissett & Edgley, 1974: 2-3). Studies in this stream typically include the voices of others as important accounts in investigation of the self-presentation. They thereby provide an analysis to compare the reactive and interactive expressive performances of both social actors and others. This way, they illustrate that the formation of self is an interactive phenomenon that involves the voices of others. Others, in these studies, are indispensable. Their presence defines the image of social actors to a great extent.

However, many studies that accentuate the voices of others tend to conceptualize self-presentation as a responsive act with which people intend to ‘attune’ to what has been said by others. Studies in this vein mainly view self-presentation as a responsive ‘public act’ of actors, which is designated primarily to impress their audiences. Hence, some scholars distinguish studies in this vein as being more towards the direction of the “management of impressions of others” (e.g. Leary & Kowalski, 1990: 34). Self-expressions of social actors in impression management are conceptualized more as reactions to the gaze of others but less as generated by the ‘inner voices’ of social actors.

Other scholars within the research on self-presentation tend to give more emphasis to the notion of “inner audience” (e.g. Greenwald & Breckler, 1985:
That is, these scholars take self-presentation as an expressive self-process in which people address important values, beliefs and concerns that are mainly “self-relevant” (Schlenker, 1980:6). Studies in this stream often highlight social actors’ internal conversations with themselves. They investigate the subtle ways in which people convey their understanding of self through balancing situational characteristics and their evaluations of others in the same self-presentation process (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The term “inner audience” represents social actors’ own aspiration to values and beliefs which they seek to make public through self-presentation.

Therefore, in the above-mentioned studies, instead of including real views and voices of others in the research, researchers primarily focus on ways social actors perceive others and address their relations without the presence of others (Schlenker, 1980). Social actors’ imagination of others in part reinforces their expressions of values, beliefs and goals that comprise the “mask” they create for themselves (e.g. Goffman, 1959). Studies in this stream see self-presentation as a process in which social actors convey their own understanding of self through confronting imaginative expectations of others (Greenwald & Breckler, 1985; Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012). According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), studies in this vein commonly preclude the actual voices of others. They construe self-presentation as an expressive process that is initiated mainly by the social actor’s own understanding of self, their imaginative view of others, and their evaluations of the social situation. In the process of self-presentation, social actors “piece together” their understanding of social encounters and express an integrated notion about themselves (Schlenker, 1980; 2012; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Studies within this stream pay more attention to scrutinizing how social actors interpret the “imagined” views, opinions and expectation of the audiences without their actual presence (Schlenker, 1980; 2012). Hence, self-presentation construed this way relies solely upon expressive performances of social actors’ as accounts for the construction of their own social reality.

Based on the above-mentioned notions, I understand that self-presentation may be neither purely reactive nor responsive in relation to the views of others. Rather, others may serve two functions in the formation of understanding of social actors’ selves. That is, social actors may choose to ‘react’ to the voices of others in order to attune to the expectations of others to form their understanding of selves. In the meantime, they may also use the imaginative views of others to strengthen self-expressions that convey values and beliefs that are vital to their own “senses of selves” (e.g. Cooley, 1922).

Hence, the process of self-presentation bridges social actors’ “private” sense of self with their understanding of self that is publicly exposed (Goffman,
In other words, social actors typically attempt to present a self-image of which they “feel good about” in a particular social setting (e.g. Cooley, 1922; Turner & Schutte, 1981). This view does not preclude the relevance of others in the formation of understanding of self. Rather, it scrutinizes how the “good sense of self” is an ongoing process where social actors seek to “piece together” information about the personally held values, beliefs and goals of social actors, and the particular demands of a social situation, as well as the expectation of others (Cooley, 1922).

My research on the self-presentation of a group of sporty top managers aims primarily to explore how these individuals interpret their athletic behaviours to express values, beliefs and goals that are vital for their understanding of the self in leadership context. Based on this research aim, my study will follow the stream of studies that mainly focuses on self-expressions of social actors’ ‘inner’ sense of self. That is, this research views self-presentation as a self-driven process in which people enact expressive actions to convey their own understanding of the social encounters in order to present an adequately “fitting” image of self. I thereby use the term self-presentation or presentation of the self to avoid any confusion that may be caused by different thoughts that relate to other focuses in “impression management”.

3.1.2 Self-meanings, social role, situational characteristic and the ‘imagined’ others

Generally, people prefer to present themselves in socially desirable ways. That is, actors seek to adjust the image of self to ‘fit’ the social expectations that derive from the norms and expectations of others in social interactions (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). Studies on self-presentation typically focus on the subtle ways in which actors present their understanding of themselves through conveying a definition of the interactive situation as they see it, which typically involves their assessments of the situation and others (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; 1985).

Furthermore, research on self-presentation that focuses on social actors’ interpretation of their own expressive behaviours does not preclude any consideration of social influences on the construction of social actors’ understanding of self. On the contrary, social actors’ own understanding about the social context in a situation, and their assessments of others are premises of the self-presentation (e.g. Schlenker, 1980; 1985). Hence, self-presentation is a social act in which people present the understanding of self that they see ‘fits’ best in social encounters.
A few major processes are indispensable in the self-presentation. First, individuals enter a social interaction with prior beliefs about themselves. Second, people make an assessment of situational characteristics (e.g. social rules and roles) within which interactions occur (Schlenker, 1980; 1985). Third, people tend to ‘fit’ into the given situation by evaluating what is expected of them in relation to their social role in that situation. Finally, yet importantly, people make initial assessments of others who are involved in social interactions with them (e.g. their expectations, goals and beliefs). They relate to others either by allowing some people to exert influence on them, or by classifying others based on values and beliefs they hold for themselves. Drawing on information from all the aforementioned aspects, people construct a “desired image” of themselves relating to the social role they occupy, which they believe will preserve or enhance the values and beliefs they personally hold and is simultaneously compatible with the situational characteristics and the views of others (Stryker & Statham, 1985).

**Self-meanings and self-presentation**

Self-presentation is an interactive self-expressive process, which involves different sources of self-meanings (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). The self-process portrayed this way is thus meaningful in personal, interpersonal and social dimensions (Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2003). People attribute meanings to their sense of self through relating to the responses of others as the performer on a social role (Osgood et al., 1957; Burke, 1980).

People obtain meanings of the self through self-reflexive activities that involve evaluation of the situation, others’ responses and our own understanding of the role we occupy. Based on the obvious social relevance, people generate self-meanings through exposing ourselves in the public. Thus our actions, words, and appearances become significant symbols of self-meanings (Mead, 1934). Self-meanings take the form of important values and beliefs that people use to lay the basis of their understanding of self. People use self-presentational practices to create and convey the understanding of self-meanings to others in social interactions (Schlenker, 1980; Goffman, 1959).

Schlenker suggests that people’s self-presentation is often highly “self-relevant” (e.g. 1980:6). That is, when people seek to present the “desired image” of self to others, they express values and beliefs they personally hold. By presenting the self, they seek to convince others to embrace personally held values to enhance their self-esteem and maintain self-consistency (Schlenker, 2003). In this sense, self-presentation is an expressive device with which social actors project an image of the self that does not only convey personally held values and beliefs, but also appears to ‘fit’ in the situation in
which they are embedded. Hence, the ‘self-relevance’ of self-presentation is inseparable from social encounters.

Furthermore, according to Schlenker (1980; 1985), self-presentation should not be illustrated as a sole response to situational pressures, or conformity to the expectations of others. Self-presentation is the combination of features of the actor’s self-concept, their establishment of self-esteem and confidence in a situation based on the understanding of social roles, the assessment of situational characteristics and their evaluations of the audience’s preferences (e.g. Schlenker, 2012: 548). In other words, self-presentations are “variably directed to different audiences, as a function of both situational and personal variables” (e.g. Greenwald & Breckler, 1985: 127).

Therefore, self-presentation is a self-expressive process where people enact self-expressions to “piece together” self-validated knowledge that concerns the self, the social role, the context of the situation and others (Schlenker, 2012: 548; Schlenker, 1980; 1985; Goffman, 1959). Hence, examining people’s self-presentations requires the researcher to be attentive to expressions that are not only centred on “self”, but also concern the social environment, their understanding of the social role and their imaginations of important characteristics of others (Schlenker, 1980; Stryker & Statham, 1985).

**Self-presentation and social role**

People present themselves in social life with imaginative views of themselves that are related to the social roles they occupy (McCall & Simmons, 1966). People take on multiple roles in social life. Yet we are aware of the “hierarchies of roles” in the contexts of different social situations. In other words, we identify with a particular social role in the situation where that role is thought to be most significant (Stryker & Statham, 1985).

Multiple senses of self that concern different roles we take on may often take place simultaneously in one social situation. In such circumstances, we tend to outline a hierarchy of prominences of different roles according to our own perceptions of the importance of different roles we occupy (Stryker & Statham, 1985). For example, in workplaces, people tend to place more emphasis on their professional and administrative roles; whereas in private life, roles such as being a parent, child or spouse come to take over the individual’s sense of self. Yet there are cases and circumstances where people are not able to make salient distinctions between ‘private’ and ‘public’ roles.

In addition to the “role hierarchy”, our understanding of important attributes of the social role also induces influences on the construction of the sense of self in a given situation (Schlenker, 2012). The way people understand the
prevailing values in their social role and particular role-expectations compose a large part of one’s sense of self. Social actors identify themselves with the social role in self-presentation by commonly upholding some prevailing values, norms that are situated in the conventional concept of social roles. They may also make efforts to interpret and convey meanings of their behaviours based on the prevailing values of the social role. For example, a nurse may interpret his or her behaviours by drawing on prevailing values of the social role such as ‘caring’ when presenting the self to others. This way, the self-presentation also intensifies existing values that reside in the understanding of a social role.

Moreover, people seek to convey a persuasive and truthful self-image to others, yet, in order to express the salience of important values that underscore their social role, they tend to fabricate the “desired image” of self by drawing on some qualities or characteristics exemplified by prototypical people (Schlenker, 2012: 548). That is, even when people do not truly see themselves as having a particular set of attributes as occupants of a social role, they imagine idealized exemplars and project qualities that they believe are vital to the social role they occupy in their own self-presentation. Therefore, what is presented may be a self-image that is “a little better” than the self; but it is “truer” in terms of how the social actors want others to perceive them (Cooley, 1922; Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2012).

In my study, I intend to understand how a group of sporty top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to construct their understanding as occupants of the leadership role. I anchor the analysis in self-expressions that concern how these top managers convey an imaginative view of themselves as occupants of the leadership role through describing what they ought to do.

**Self-presentation and situational characteristics**

One core assumption of the dramaturgical approach of self-presentation is that human behaviours, as well as our understanding of self that is expressed through these behaviours, take place in specific settings. In other words, our understanding of self is expressed through behaviours that are bounded by our understanding of the social setting, because people typically seek to present the self as the best “fit” in a social situation (Goffman, 1959). Hence, the formation of understanding of self is inseparable from our assessment of the situation.

The dramaturgical notion of self-presentation allocates the locus of the presentation of self in social settings, or the “scene” of an act on stage in a dramaturgical term. This “setting” includes notions around norms, values and
widely acknowledged beliefs that are situated in the social environment. Normally, people seek to behave within a social setting where their behaviours are bounded by the existing values and norms.

Therefore, the self-presentation process is an iterative route in which people constantly balance between expressions about ‘who they are’, ‘whom they want to become’ and ‘what is desired’ in a situation (Schlenker, 2003). When people present the self to others they attain knowledge about the context of a situation such as values and norms and social rules and regulations, as well as detecting relevant roles in that situation (Schlenker, 1985; 2003: 499). Thus, self-expressions do not always directly concern the self, but also contain content that concerns their understanding and assessment of values, norms and rules of the social environment.

**Self-presentation and the ‘imagined’ others**

Furthermore, the concept of self is inseparable from the existence of others (Denzin, 1992). The ‘drama’ of self-presentation lies in the interplay between the individual’s “feeling of the self” and the way they perceive others (e.g. Cooley, 1922: 87). A dramaturgical approach to the self-presentation highlights this interplay between self and “similarly expressive others” by proposing the concept of “audience” (e.g. Brissett & Edgley, 1974: 3). As mentioned earlier, the dramaturgical terminology “audience” is later developed to two distinguished focuses in the research on self-presentation. That is, the “audience” we seek to impress may actually be present, or it may take the form of our imagination of others’ expectations of ourselves (e.g. Schlenker, 2012).

When social actors interact with others, they may be confronted by their imagination of the views, opinions and values held by others. Hence, people ‘allow’ others to make changes to their “self-feelings” without the actual presence of others (Cooley, 1922). As Cooley (1922) explains, one reflects and forms images of one’s self from the imaginary perspective of others. Cooley calls this concept the “looking-glass self” (1922: 151-152). With this concept, he argues that we normally form a sense of self based on “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride and mortification” derived from that judgement (Cooley, 1922: 87). Cooley thereby asserts that the imaginations people have of one another constitute the “solid facts” of their sense of self and the society (Cooley, 1922: 87).

Moreover, when people define themselves in social interactions, they give identities to others, too (Charon, 1989). Social actors consider “a set of reactions and performances by others the expressive implications of which
tend to confirm [their] detailed and imaginative view of [themselves] as an occupant of a position” (McCall & Simmons, 1966:72). Hence, labelling others is an important part of self-presentation. While we adjust the self to impress others, we evaluate the values, beliefs and goals held by others, and we “label” others primarily to mobilize them as “role supports” (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1966). That is, we give identities to others to call forth appreciated actions for ourselves (Charon, 1989: 143; Alvesson, 1994). Hence, others are not only sources of our “self-feelings”, but they are also a “supporting role” in the construction of our self-feelings that is based on the values and beliefs we intend to highlight in the self-presentation (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1962). Hence, when we present ourselves to others, our self-expressions often contain content that concerns the views and opinions, or simply our evaluations and classifications, of others.

3.2 Self-expressions

Goffman takes the whole range of expressive apparatus such as verbal expressions, expression of emotions, feelings and senses, as well as appearances as valid accounts of self-expressions (Goffman, 1959). For Goffman, what people say “give[s]” the information they intend to convey, whereas what people do, “give[s] off” how meanings are being embedded in people’s social actions (Goffman, 1959:2). According to Goffman, people deliberately “give” information about the values and beliefs that they perceive as crucial for their understanding of themselves through verbal expressions. Yet in his study on the “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”, Goffman (1959) mainly focuses on analyzing “theatrical” non-verbal performances such as posture, gestures, appearances etc.

Deriving from Goffman’s dramaturgical attempt in the study of self, Schlenker (1980; 1985; 2012) highlights verbal communications as a crucial part of expressive account in social actors’ self-presentation. According to Schlenker, people purposely develop stories about themselves to convey the most important values and beliefs that are vital to their sense of self by enacting verbal accounts in the self-presentation.

Moreover, for Schlenker (2012), the aspects of self that become accessible in memory and therefore more likely to be available for self-presentations are determined by the relevance and importance of the values, beliefs and goals they intend to convey to impress a particular audience and in a specific situation (2012: 548). In other words, when giving information about themselves, people typically shape their experience to convey values and
beliefs which it is in their interests to convey by using verbal techniques (Schlenker, 2012).

In social life, when we attempt to project an idealized self-image by “giving” information about “who we want to be” - through interweaving important values and beliefs when telling a story about ourselves - we also seek to ‘live up’ to this “mask” (Goffman, 1959: 19). According to Goffman, the “mask” we create in self-presentation speaks for the aspirations of an idealized version of self which is often little better than we actually are (1959; Cooley, 1922). Consequently, we develop social anxiety about a possible discrepancy between ‘who we are’ and ‘who we want to be’ (Goffman, 1959; Brissett & Edgley, 1974; Goffman, 1974). We fear our manners, habits, emotional expressions or even our appearance reveal the ‘true’ image of ourselves, which may not coincide exactly with the image we try to convey to others (Goffman, 1974).

Responding to social anxieties as such, we carry out expressive performances such as verbal expressions, adjust visible expressive apparatuses such as “clothing, hair style, gestures, facial expression, and eye movement – literally anything that human beings have at their expressive command” to maintain the coherence of self-presentation (Edgley, 2003: 146; Goffman, 1959: 19). This way, we orchestrate “presumably unintentional” “communication-expressions” to “give off” information about ourselves (Goffman, 1959: 4).

Social actors generally “give off” information about themselves in a controlled manner. Yet they express themselves spontaneously or even in an impulsive manner or simply casually at times. Some of these expressions may be considered as unselcconsciously reflexive of something about the self, which may lead to intensified anxieties (Schlenker, 1980; 1985). Thus, in self-presentation, people tend to deliberately control informative cues (both verbal and performative) in order to avoid self-prostration (Goffman, 1959; Brissett & Edgley, 1974).

Generally, people control expressive performances through enacting performative strategies such as managing visibility of the appearance, and informational control through managing expressions of emotions and feelings (Goffman, 1959; Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006; Tseëlōn, 1989; Down & Reveley, 2009). Hence, according to Goffman, social actors “perform” the self with the most adequate image or the “desired image” (in Schlenker’s term) (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; 1985). Moreover, while enacting “theatrical” performative strategies, social actors disclose important values, beliefs and goals in life that are in their interests in the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959: 4). For example, a nurse may seek to convey the value of being caring through adjusting his or her expressive performances at work in
certain ways. And he or she may attempt to regulate behaviours and appearances in front of people so that they are more expressive of the values that he/she intends to convey.

Hence, in the research on self-presentation, it is necessary to pay attention to the expressive performances of social actors in two ways. First, the research needs to focus on how people use verbal techniques to develop stories about their experiences in particular settings. This is done to understand the values, beliefs or goals they intend to convey to others through building an idealized image of them. Second, the research needs to be attentive to ways in which social actors regulate their expressive performances, because it is within the adjustment of expressive behaviours that social actors may reveal the most important values and beliefs that are vital to their understanding of self.

3.3 Research questions

This study aims to unpack the linkage between lifestyle behaviours in athletic endeavours and the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective. I intend to achieve this aim through investigating the self-presentational practices of a group of sporty top managers. With this investigation, I attempt to understand how the sporty managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours, and how they enact these interpretations to create and express important values, beliefs and/or concerns to convey their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role.

As elaborated earlier, in the process of self-presentation, people enact expressive performances to convey values, beliefs, goals and concerns that are vital to their sense of self in four distinctive and interrelated aspects. Theories explain that people generally present the self by defining situational characteristics, considering prevailing values in the social role, evaluating others, and “maintaining expressive control” (Goffman, 1959: 51; Schlenker, 1980, 1985). Hence, examining people’s self-presentation requires the researcher to be attentive not only to people’s self-expressions that are centred on self, but also to those expressive indications that concern characteristics of the social environment, their understanding of the social role they occupy, and their evaluations of important characteristics of the “imagined” others.

Self-presentation is hence an integration of self-expressions that contain the content of social actors’ definition of the context of the situation, their understanding of the social role, and their assessment of relations with others, as well as their efforts in “expressive control”, (Schlenker, 2012: 548;
Schlenker, 1980; 1985; Goffman, 1959). Based on these notions, I intend to investigate the process of self-presentation by looking into expressions of top managers that concern the content in the aforementioned four aspects. I formulate the following research questions in my attempt to study the self-presentation of a group of sporty top managers:

1. How do the sporty top managers assess *situational characteristics* of the leadership context when talking about their experiences in athletic endeavours?
2. How do they describe an idealized image of themselves?
3. How do they define their relations with others?
4. How do they enact performative strategies to avoid discreditable information about themselves?
4. Research design and method

This study sets out to examine how a group of sporty top managers in Sweden express values, beliefs, goals and/or concerns through interpreting their engagement in athletic endeavours in a process of self-presentation. Based on its dramaturgical origin, theories of self-presentation take social actors’ self-expressions such as explicit verbal expressions (language used that indicates directly “whom they want to become”) and implicit performative expressions (ways in which people live up to particular values) as accounts of the knowledge of people’s self-expressions in the process of self-presentation. Hence, this research anchors an analytical focus in the ways in which a group of sporty top managers develop verbal ‘plots’ to convey important values, beliefs and concerns about their athletic endeavours, and in the performative expressions used to control informative cues in the self-presentation (e.g. Goffman, 1959: 51).

Goffman contends (1959) that individuals enact both language and ‘performances’ as expressive apparatus to convey and enhance values in life in which they anchor their senses of self in daily life. That is, people use language to make sense of their social encounters and to convey meanings of values and beliefs that are vital to their sense of self in a particular situation (Weick, 1995). By using language, people construct ‘plots’ in life stories to make “retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations” (Weick, 1995: 15).

Hence, telling stories about one’s experience is “the reflexive construction and re-production” of values and beliefs which people hold on to in order to deal with “openness and uncertainties of life” (Alvesson, 2010: 212). Through telling life stories, people express personal values; they form a site where coherent, shared experiences confront or compliment social values and norms (Tyler, 2007; Weick, 2001).

Furthermore, for Goffman, the performative aspect of meaning expression refers to how people control and manage their expressions in language, appearance and emotions in order to live up to the idealized image they intend to present in front of people (Goffman, 1959; Brissett & Edgley, 1974; Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006; Waskul & Vannini, 2006). For example, people tend to “perform” to adjust impulsive, spontaneous expressions so that they
can appear rational and self-content. Hence, people control or modify performative expressions to avoid any information that may discredit their image in front of others (Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006).

In this study, I intend to achieve the research objective by obtaining information about the self-presentation of the sporty top managers in two respects. First, I examine how the sporty top managers talk about their athletic endeavours retrospectively in life stories to convey important values, beliefs and concerns that contain aspirations about “who they are” and “whom they want to become”. Second, I examine performative expressions (including verbal expressions, surface appearance, the use of clothing and gestures, and expressions of emotions) with which the top managers control and manage informational cues to maintain consistency in the important values and beliefs they articulate in verbal expressions (Goffman, 1959; Stryker, 1980; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006).

In this chapter, I introduce the research process, the methods used in the field study. I also explain ways in which I present the data and construct a dramaturgical analytical frame for the study. Finally, I discuss issues of research ethics and limitations that remain in the study.

4.1 Research process

4.1.1 Data sampling

This study concerns the private lifestyle behaviours of individuals; it involves substantial amounts of information that concern people’s feelings, emotions and even bodily senses that are associated with lifestyle behaviours. Based on the nature of the study, my choices of research participants approximate the snowball sampling method (e.g. Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

The snowball, or chain referral, sampling is a method that has been widely used in qualitative sociological research (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Becker, 1970). The method allows a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981: 141). The method is well-suited when the focus of the study is on a sensitive issue, perhaps concerning a relatively private matter such as lifestyle behaviours, personal emotions etc. and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study. Moreover, Coleman (1958) has argued that the snowball or referral sampling method is designed uniquely for sociological research because it allows for
the sampling of natural interactional units (e.g. Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981: 141-142).

Soon after I entered the “field” in 2010, I intended to gather as much information as possible about the phenomenon of ‘leaders in sport’. Therefore, I aimed to recruit many participants in this study. With the referral sampling, between 2010 and 2014, I was able to recruit 24 people, 9 women and 15 men, in the initial phase of my research. They included CEOs of large corporations, CEOs and partners of private businesses and regional directors of global organizations. The age range of all the participants is between 35 and 55 years, and their nationalities are Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Irish.

I relied on recruiting a few participants to whom I had gained access in the beginning of the ‘field work’ to enrol more people whom they knew. I chose the first group of participants based on their high public profile. These business leaders are known for their athletic engagement, and their stories are often published in the business press. I contacted 6 to 7 persons. After meeting some of these top managers, they introduced me to other people they knew within their own ‘network’ of executives who shared similar interests in lifestyle approaches.

Furthermore, as shown in the tables in the appendix, the 24 managers/executives that I have recruited for the initial phase of this study hold positions such as Reginal Director, Chief Executive Officer, Director of the Human Resource Department, etc. I label all of them as ‘sporty top managers’ in this report as they all, despite of the different titles, play the role as the most important decision makers in their respective local organizations.

4.1.2 An iterative research process

I embarked this research in 2010. The initial research interests were inspired by the increasing number of sporty top managers that had been frequently featured as good leaders in various media, such as TV programmes, the business press or leadership magazines. When entering into the “field” in 2010, I had initial ideas about the theoretical approach of the phenomenon of “leaders in sport”. That is, I intended to study how invisible managerial notions of health ideals had come to subjugate the understanding of self on the part of these sporty top managers.

Between 2010 and 2014, I focused on collecting empirical material. In the meantime, I also constantly reflected upon the empirical material in hand and, based on these reflections, I adjusted my views on the phenomenon. I also
went back to the field to revisit remaining issues and to resolve my puzzles around the phenomenon, and eventually made changes in my choice of theories and literatures to be used in framing this thesis. The research process is, therefore, an iterative one.

Berkowitz (1997) points out that qualitative research is fundamentally an iterative set of processes. These processes are “a loop-like pattern of multiple rounds of revisiting the data as additional questions emerge, new connections are unearthed, and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding of the material”. Hence, the role of iteration begins in the early phase of a qualitative research process and is not merely a repetitive mechanical task but is “a deeply reflexive process” and a key to “revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings” (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009:77).

In line with the aforementioned thoughts, while collecting empirical material, with some of the empirical insights obtained through interviews with some of the participants, I began to reconsider the use of theory and the way of reporting the empirical data along the way.

The methods used in the research process are mainly interviews and observations. I have also used secondary data such as newspaper articles and posts on social media. I will discuss the research methods in more detail in a later section in this chapter.

In the first interviews with study participants, I used the semi-structured interview method. I asked open questions or generic questions. These questions were typically designed to obtain general information such as the frequency of their exercise routines, the type of sports they choose to do, a general description of their lifestyle and a description of their life and career. For example, I asked the participants to talk about their life in general, their childhood, work and life situations etc. Typical questions in first interviews were: “Why is athleticism and participating in sport important for you?” “How often do you exercise?” “How do you feel about your engagement in sporting activities?” “What do you understand by being ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’?” “How do you tell whether a person is healthy or not?” “How do you view yourself as a leader?” Based on these first interviews with research participants, I have gained many empirical insights into the phenomenon of sporty top managers, which has inspired me with further reflections on new theoretical approaches, the inclusion of new sets of literature, and the decision on the method for reporting this study, etc.
Firstly, I have gained empirical insights into the industry context of the sporty top managers. Due to the referral sampling method, I did not control the range of industries while selecting the participants. However, the first group of research participants was deliberately drawn from different types of industries. They recommended other research participants both from the same industries and from other business areas. Hence, the range of industries from which the participants come is a broad one. They are from business areas such as health and recreation, engineering consultancy, public services, IT and software design, school and education, as well as human resources and recruitment consultancy.

Amongst all the top managers from diverse industries and professional fields, there is only one exception, in which the then CEO of a health and recreation company made an extensive connection between his pursuits in a high level of physical mastery and his role as a leader in a particular health-building and recreation supplying industry. Otherwise, I have observed that despite the large spread of industries amongst the top managers interviewed, the general interpretation of their experiences in athletic endeavours is not restricted by the characteristics of any specific type of industry.

Secondly, I have revisited the initial theoretical ground that emerged from the empirical material in hand after new insights. After interviewing some of the participants, my initial theoretical stand began to falter. Many research participants have shown great enthusiasm for sporting activities. When they were asked how they viewed themselves as leaders, they made great efforts to illustrate an idealized image of a leader by connecting athletic endeavours to many aspects. Although this question might be judged as being ‘leading’ or ‘biased’ based on its implication for the link between athleticism and the sense of self as a leader, I was inspired by the way in which some research participants responded to this question. They described this linkage through telling convincing stories about themselves having become a better leader and a better person through engaging in athletic endeavours.

This observation made me reconsider the theoretical grounding for this thesis. Inspired by the empirical material, I began to lean towards focusing on examining each individual’s creativity in the construction of an “infallible image” as a leader instead of the initial focus on the force of invisible hands of post-disciplinary managerial notions embedded in lifestyle management. The empirical data has shown me that, despite all the social constraints, these sporty top managers make an active effort to connect seemingly irrelevant events, ideas, behaviours into integrated, coherent stories, with which they intend to project the best side of the self in any particular social interactions (in this case, the interviews with them are considered as social interactions). This has become a major source of the theoretical inspiration for this thesis.
Moreover, I also observed that when participants made efforts to construct a coherent story about themselves as leaders through talking about their experiences in athletic endeavours, they did not only talk about the ‘self’. Rather, they tried to illustrate a convincing setting for the story, the contextual elements, dramatic events etc. For example, one top manager told me a whole story about how he had transformed from an unpopular, inefficient and alcoholic person (leader) into a “new man” who exercised regularly, lived healthily, and was energetic and efficient at work. He told me he had also implemented similar approaches in the workplace. He initiated regular breaks during working hours where employees were asked to exercise together for 20 minutes. He also enforced a ban on alcohol at Christmas parties and other social events in the company. Such stories made me reflect upon individualized features in their stories, and the creativities they express in highly regulated working life.

Inspired by empirical insights as such, I began to do more literature research, looking for better sets of theories, which in my view may bring forth the individualized, unique and creative aspects of the stories of the sporty top managers. These empirical insights have gradually helped me to decide to focus on unpacking the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours and their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role with a symbolic interactionist world view and theories of self-presentation. With these theories, I intend to focus on examining moments when people articulate self-meanings through interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours to create and communicate the understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role.

Thirdly, the above-mentioned empirical insights also led to choices of using other sets of literature in order to understand the underlying meanings of athletic endeavours. For example, in one interview, a female manager who practises martial arts told me, to my surprise, that her male peers were more impressed by her outstanding performances in martial arts than her professional achievements. Another participant confidently stated that the sporty top managers such as himself made up the new elite class in the society. Moreover, many participants have addressed the importance of fitness, a toned appearance and the importance of engaging in the “right” types of sporting activities. Some of these notions have also been repeatedly mentioned by different participants in this study.

Based on this empirical material, and in order to understand underlying meanings of these statements, I went back to do some literature research on the sociology of athleticism, sport and health behaviours. In this study, I include a literature review of social interpretations of athleticism and sporting
activities based on most of the notions that emerged during interviews in this
study. This literature review lays an interpretive foundation for understanding
underlying layers of meanings in self-expressions that are articulated by the
top managers.

Finally, the iterative research process is also beneficial for this study in the
sense that it facilitates the research process in refining the interview questions
during the process. I paid attention to how people talked about their
experiences in athletic endeavours, and in particular, how they talked about
their understanding of the role of leader by linking it to their experiences in
athletic endeavours. I took note of each new element that emerged. For
example, some participants used stories from their childhood to emphasize the
importance of an athletic lifestyle in their life, and when this theme had been
repeated by several participants, I added “childhood and upbringing” as one
of the major themes in the interview structure.

Furthermore, most of the research participants were keen to talk about their
initiatives in promoting the concept of ‘healthy’ in the workplace. I therefore
added this element as one of the sub-themes under the category of “current
work situation”. Based on the interview data that I managed to collect at
different points of the study, I was able to outline a more specific interview
structure that contained major categories such as “childhood and upbringing”,
“current work situation”, “health ideals”, “lifestyle approaches”, and “views
of a good leader” etc. In this report, I present the empirical material following
this structure, too.

Therefore, although the information I have obtained with twenty-four research
participants is different in ‘depth’ and ‘width’ due to the fact that some
participants are more reflective and open about their experience of athletic
endeavours than others, all participants have contributed insightful reflections,
interesting themes and ideas to this study.

The initial phase of the iterative research process that involves twenty-four
participants serves a similar function of a pilot study for this research. Many
qualitative researchers have recognized the advantage of conducting a pilot
study prior to entering the field (Sampson, 2004: 387). Sampson states that
although the results of pilots have rarely been comprehensively reported as
reflexive accounts of research in action, they often render crucial insights that
later influence the research process substantially (2004). In the case of this
study, by recruiting twenty-four participants in the early phase of the research,
I found that I learned some things that I had not anticipated prior entering the
field. I have also learnt that it was harder than I expected to simply ‘apply’
theories and draw self-evident conclusions about the phenomenon of interest.
This insight leads to reflexive thoughts and adjustment of my theoretical

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stance, as well as the refining of the interview framework used in later phase of the research.

Based on the reflexive accounts from the early phase of this study, I proceeded the study with a developed view on ‘leaders in sport’. I re-evaluated the initial theoretical filtering. Without overlooking the coercive forces of social discourses, I decide to place the research emphasis on the individual creativity in a self-formation process. Adopting a symbolic interactionist world view, I finally anchor the research aim in unpacking the linkage between athletic endeavours and the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective. With this aim, my research sets out to examine how five top managers interpret their personal experiences in athletic endeavours to create and convey self-meanings that are relevant to their senses of self as occupants of the leadership role.

In order to maintain the transparency of the research and to highlight the value of the early yet very crucial phase of the research process, I attach four tables of information of all twenty-four participants as the appendix of this report in the end of the book. These tables provide individual information regarding the twenty-four participants, the specifications of the length of interviews, observations and filed notes, and the early phase coding and reflexive accounts resulted from the empirical material.

### 4.1.3 The choice of five stories

In this thesis, based on the adjusted research focus, I choose to report five stories of the top managers. Theories of self-presentation are devoted mainly to giving a detailed examination of ways in which people express who they are and whom they want to become by engaging in some behaviours and through interpreting their experience of these behaviours in certain ways to express and enhance particular values that they seek to sustain (Goffman, 1959). Studies that apply these theories require sufficient information about ways in which people create plots and storylines to create new meanings that concern the social environment in which they are situated their understanding of self in terms of the social role they occupy, and their understanding of relations with others (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980).

Moreover, theories of self-presentation also consider expressive performances such as control of utterances and actions to be an important part of the accounts of the self-presentation. Hence, to study how social actors present their understanding of self as the occupant of a social role, the research needs to embrace a broad range of self-expressions of the social actor.
Based on the choice of these theories, and in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the formation of understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role of some sporty top managers, I chose to focus on presenting and analyzing the stories of five top managers instead of isolating quotes of theirs. This also accords with the fundamental assumption of symbolic interactionist view of self and that of the theories of self-presentation, which advocates that the making of self is a process in which people creatively enact their experiences in daily social interactions to construct an imaginative view of themselves (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; Mead, 1934). I intend to focus on presenting five individuals and give a thorough scrutiny on their self-presentational practices. The choice of the top managers for this thesis is based on the following considerations.

First, I chose those participants with whom I was able to spend a relatively longer time in interviews and in observations. In other words, the choice of the participants partially depends on the accessibility. Second, I chose five stories from twenty-four sporty top managers based on the fact that they each presented me with a unique story about themselves while interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours. These top managers convey distinct personal characteristics in storytelling. Yet, at the same time, their stories also include most of the themes that have been articulated by other participants. For example, notions such as “being transformed into a better personal and leader”, “heightened physical mastery indicates an elitist status for a leader”, “girls learn to like sports to gain acknowledgements by guys” etc. have been repeatedly mentioned by many participants. I choose to present the five stories with the richest content with an intent of providing the most comprehensive illustration of how the sporty top managers may use their experiences in athletic endeavours to express meaningful notions regarding themselves as leaders.

Moreover, with theories of self-presentation, the research questions are being posed to address how people interweave their aspirations on personal, interpersonal and social dimensions into one integrated self-formation process. Hence, this contrast between highly individualized stories and similar ways of meaning-aligning behaviours has aroused my interest in giving a thorough scrutiny of these five stories.

**Adam**

Adam is 43 years old. He enjoys frequent exposure in the media. He has become a public profile because of his rigorous athletic endeavours. He has received several awards both in Sweden and abroad for his contribution in inspiring employees in terms of a healthy lifestyle and for his efforts in ‘modelling’ a healthy, active and constructive lifestyle in the organization. I
chose Adam as one of the five top managers in this report based on his deliberate expressions about ‘who he is’, ‘who he wants to become’ through emphasizing the importance of maintaining a high physical mastery of his athletic endeavours.

Adam likes to do all kinds of sports, particularly running, skiing, playing tennis and swimming. His engagement in athletic endeavours says much about him as a person and a leader. He is also enthusiastic about promoting healthy values in his company. He aims to become a leader who is influential for the lives of others both inside and outside the workplace. It is his high enthusiasm in athletic endeavours in his private life and his intention to bring this enthusiasm to building his public image as a leader, as well as his willingness to make substantial changes in the lives of others that made me choose his story as one of the five stories in this report.

In three years, I have met Adam eight times for both interviews and observations. I attended the management training courses in his company in 2011. I took part in one of his Quarterly Report meetings with major investors at one of Swedbank’s offices in Stockholm in 2012. I participated in the company’s 50th anniversary celebrations, which lasted for three days in the summer of 2012; and I followed him in several of the competitions he initiated to challenge other CEOs in various sporting activities in 2012 and 2013. During the three years I followed Adam’s activities, his company grew aggressively and rapidly. He has been through a divorce, stepped down from his CEO position and finally made a comeback in 2014.

Our first meeting for this research took place in the autumn of 2010 in Adam’s office. It was an early morning meeting, but Adam told me he had already done a two-hour workout. At our meeting, I was able to put the general questions that I had prepared earlier. The content of the general questions included his lifestyle approaches, his belief in collective health management, his career development etc. It was not difficult to make Adam start to talk enthusiastically about his athletic endeavours, his lifestyle approaches, his views of an ideal leader etc.

The following meetings took place both before and after a meeting at Swedbank where he reported the company’s quarterly financial statement to investors in March 2011. Our meetings lasted approximately one hour in total. In these two meetings, Adam talked about his vision for his company, his health-promoting initiatives in the company, and his objectives of becoming an inspiring leader for his company. He expressed his belief that ‘health brings wealth’.
In early 2012, I met Adam again in a cafeteria in the city centre over a coffee. This venue was chosen as it was convenient for Adam since he was going to leave his car for inspection in the city immediately after the meeting. This meeting lasted about one hour. Adam arrived clearly exhausted and stressed. He was in the midst of a divorce. He talked at length about how sporting activities had made him a strong survivor of obstacles in his life such as the sad ending of his marriage. He told me he had decided to step down from the position as CEO for a while.

After that, I met Adam once, in mid-2013 in his office. The meeting lasted about one hour. At that time, Adam held the position as Chairman of the Board. He talked about his vision of writing a leadership book based on his vast experience. The last meeting I had with Adam was at the beginning of 2014. The meeting lasted about two hours. We began the meeting over lunch near his office and continued in his office. At this meeting, Adam told me he was ready to return to making decisions for his company, because he feared the values he had managed to nurture in the company were fading under the new leadership.

Today, Adam is back in his position as CEO and runs one of the fastest-growing companies in the field of engineering consultancy. He appears more frequently in social media, in public media and in newspaper articles. I am able to follow his activities largely based on his frequent exposure in social media. He continues his vigorous engagement in sporting activities, and is still determined to build an organizational culture with ‘healthy’ values.

**Martin**

Martin is to some extent similar to Adam. They are similar in age. Both are CEOs of the company of which they possess a large part of the ownership. Both have received awards for their outstanding performances in building a lifestyle that is regarded as healthy and inspiring for their employees.

Martin is 44 years old. He is divorced and shares custody of his two children with his ex-wife. He currently lives with his girlfriend who also takes part in sports activities. I met Martin for three interviews at different points in time between 2011 and 2013. Each interview lasted on average about one and a half hours.

Martin used to train as a junior elite swimmer at school. Now he likes going skiing, he plays tennis and he runs. Martin sees youthfulness as one of the most important resources in the workplace. He believes that athletic endeavours may slow down physiological ageing or may even reverse ageing processes to some extent. After he won “The Healthy Boss of the Year” award,
he began to promote health interventions in his company more progressively and intensively. He takes his reputation as the “healthy leader” as an instrumental approach for achieving leadership objectives. He initiated a regular physiological monitoring process whereby employees were regularly tested for their physiological fitness. It is Martin’s instrumental view of his reputation as the “healthy leader”, and his unique interpretation of ‘ageing’ that made me include his story in this report.

I met Martin for our first interview in November 2011 in his office in central Stockholm. The meeting took place immediately after he had won a leadership prize and lasted for about two hours. In this meeting, Martin talked about his belief in reducing the physiological age of himself and his employees through engaging in regular exercise. He expressed his belief in staying healthy, fit and youthful as an indispensable quality of a leader.

We met for a further two, shorter, meetings in the spring of 2012. The total length of these interviews was approximately two and half hours. In these meetings, I was able to ask him about personal details such as his childhood experience and his career development. Furthermore, in our last meeting, Martin told me that his company had had to stop the regular monitoring of the physiological condition of employees as a result of criticism raised both internally and outside the company. This criticism claimed that the excessive involvement in the private life of employees was an inappropriate act. Despite this, Martin continued to pursue his commitments in athletic endeavours.

Dan

Dan, 45, is from Ireland. I got to know Dan through a private connection. He has been described as the ‘sporty boss’ in his organization. He is famous for being a successful country manager in a large international enterprise, for both working hard and working-out hard.

Dan likes to go cycling. He used to be a rugby player. He also practises karate. When working in Sweden between 2011 and 2015, he began to engage in long distance running like many of his Swedish peers. During this period, he took his management team to different running races and organized several other sports competitions. At the time of writing this report, Dan has issued a Facebook challenge to his fellow executives to do push-ups on their bare fists.

The unique point in Dan’s story is that he has shown great determination in terms of becoming a ‘sporty boss’ in different cultural settings. In order to become a leader in a Swedish organization, he began to engage in sports (e.g. running) for which he did not consider himself fit. He also ‘voluntarily’
changed his body build to match the image of the type of leader he aspired to become. Based on these reasons, I include Dan’s story in this report.

I met Dan for four interviews, including lunch meetings, at different points in time between 2011 and 2015. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. I also met Dan in the gym where we both trained on several occasions. During the same period, Dan made a tremendous effort in working with a personal trainer to reduce his large muscle mass in order to look more like a runner.

Our first meeting took place in August 2011 in his office in Sollentuna, a suburban area not far from Stockholm city. In the first meeting, I intended to ask the standard general questions about his lifestyle approach, his view of health in the workplace and as a leader, as well as his views on what makes a good leader, etc. However, since Dan is not from Sweden, he was very eager to tell me about his personal life, such as his involvement in sporting activities from an early age, his reputation in the company as the ‘sporty boss’ when he held other top-management posts, and his experience of working abroad. As a result, the interview went smoothly in the sense that I only needed to follow his storytelling. Yet I find the content of this storytelling highly relevant to his self-presentation as the leader he wishes to become.

When we met again soon after the first meeting, we met at the cafeteria close to his office for a lunch meeting. In this meeting, Dan answered the general questions that were meant for our first meeting. Dan also talked more extensively about his approaches in terms of managing health in the workplace. He particularly emphasized his role as the leading figure in terms of inspiring others to engage in sporting activities more frequently.

I met Dan for two further short meetings in 2014 and 2015. Each meeting lasted about one hour. In our third meeting, Dan insisted that he was not going to compete with most of his peers at work who were highly committed to running races. According to Dan, he simply did not have the build for a runner. In our last meeting, I noticed that Dan’s body-shape had become much leaner. He then told me proudly that he had been training with a personal trainer with the aim of ‘modifying’ his physique from that of a typical front row rugby player to someone who looked like a real runner. He began to compete with his fellow management team members in running races such as half marathons and marathons.

In 2015, Dan returned to Ireland. He is now the head of the London organization of a large international enterprise. He has obviously taken his reputation as the ‘sporty boss’ with him. I have been able to follow his exercise routines from his posts on Facebook. In the autumn of 2016, Dan has initiated
a series of challenges of doing 22 fist push-ups. He throws down the challenges with a video clip of him doing 22 push-ups. He posts this video on Facebook and calls on his colleagues and friends to respond. Each person who answers this challenge also needs to post a video clip recording them doing 22 fist push-ups.

Mary

Mary is 47, divorced and shares custody of two children with her ex-husband. I first came across Mary in newspaper articles about her at the time when she began to train regularly and was preparing to compete with male executives in the Iron Man Race. She answered my proposal for a meeting promptly in an email. We met for interviews over lunch several times between 2012 and 2014. I have also followed Mary’s column on the web version of a well-read Swedish newspaper, and her Facebook posts, where she often publishes pictures of her training schedules and diet routines.

Mary has worked as a CEO in several companies throughout her career-development path. Mary views herself as the “odd one out” amongst fellow corporate executives, CEOs and top managers, who are normally middle-aged men. Mary believes that the ability to compete with male peers in a sporting situation is her way of obtaining a sense of self that is “as good as the guys”. She therefore enrolled in the Iron Man Race to be the first female CEO who challenged men in the executive world.

Mary’s extraordinary strength and determination impress me. She shows great confidence and competence in controlling situations both in her life and in professional domains. Yet she also shows concerns about being a female in the top positions competing with the ‘guys’. Another reason I chose her story as part of this report was her unique statements about ‘women in top positions’.

I met Mary for the first interview in the beginning of 2012 when she was between two jobs. We met at a restaurant close to her then home in central Stockholm. Before answering my standard questions such as her lifestyle approaches, her views of a good leader, her views on health management in the workplace etc., Mary expressed her enthusiasm and passion for the linkage between athletic endeavours and leadership. She began to talk at length about her own experience in this matter.

After the first meeting, I kept in touch with Mary through emails. I was also able to obtain the most up-to-date information about her by following her writings in her column in a well-known Swedish daily newspaper and from her posts on Facebook. We met again later in 2012 when she had taken up her
new post as the Director General of a Swedish food supplier. In this meeting, Mary talked mainly about her new visions for changing the views of her colleagues about health. She was determined to accomplish this by committing herself to participate in highly competitive sports events such as the Vasaloppet and the Iron Man Race just as all male executives do. She talked at length about her preparation for these competitions and her training sessions with “amazing” elite athletes.

The third meeting I had with Mary was in 2013. At Mary’s request, we met at a private lunch club in the centre of Stockholm. In this meeting, Mary told me that she had had to give up her plan to participate in the Iron Man Race due to injury. Yet Mary also shared with me the news that she was going to publish a book about leadership based on her own insights and experience that concern a ‘good leader’.

Anna

Anna, 46, is Regional Director of the Nordic Region of an American IT & software development company. She used to work as an instructor in a gym before pursuing a career in engineering and management. I met Anna through the recommendation of one of other research participants whose story is not included in this report. I had three meetings with Anna and I participated in a three-day Nordic Management Meeting that she held in 2012.

Anna believes that the competitiveness that a woman shows in sports and competitions may sometimes be more convincing evidence of her status as a leader than her experience and knowledge at work. She is very conscious of the fact that she is a woman and a leader in a male-dominated organization. She sees athletic endeavours as her way of expressing convincing legitimacy and confidence as a leader. Like Mary, Anna has shown both a confident side of self and an anxious side of self, which concerns female gender. I chose Anna’s story for this report based on her unique view of ‘becoming a super woman’.

I interviewed Anna for the first time in November 2011. We had a lunch meeting in her office in Solna, a well-known office and residential area near Stockholm city centre. In the first meeting, I asked general questions about her lifestyle approaches, her opinions and interventions in workplace health management, her views of good leaders etc. In the first meeting, Anna brought up the issue of being a woman in top positions. She emphasized that she tried to be a ‘super woman’ in order to convince her subordinates of her leadership.

Soon after that meeting, I met Anna and her management team again and followed her (and other management team members) in a three-day
management meeting. In this three-day event, I was able to observe how Anna stood in front of her management team, worked her ‘power-dressing’, and used her height to facilitate her authority as the major decision-maker in that setting.

In the spring of 2012, I had another meeting with Anna in her office. This time, we talked more about her private life. She talked openly about her childhood and upbringing, and her career development from an instructor at the gym to a Regional Director at a global IT company. Anna also talked openly about her divorce. She talked about how she overcame life obstacles as such and grew stronger afterwards.

4.1.4 Methods

Based on the empirical insights that I have obtained from the pilot study, I have chosen to report the stories of five sporty top managers in this thesis. I continue my research process by focusing on the chosen five top managers. After I had made this decision, I conducted a few more interviews with some of the chosen top managers for supplementary information. For example, with the choice of theories, I intended to include self-expressions of the sporty top managers that concern matters such as their understanding of the social situation, relations with others and an idealized view of themselves. If information was found to be limited regarding any of these aspects, I would call for a supplementary meeting. Therefore, the data collection in the final phase of research process is theory-driven.

Interviews and observations serve as the main research methods in this study. In the method section, I introduce the methods used both in the whole research process and in the process after I had decided on the more focused research aim, and the group of participants.

Interviews

In this study, I used semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed the top managers to articulate the history and the present state of their lives. In these interviews, I did not intend to constrain participants’ own initiatives in constructing their life stories. I wanted to make them to talk openly about their experience of athletic endeavours. For example, I asked the top managers to talk about their childhood, upbringing, career development, healthy ideals, their own lifestyle approaches, and their views about a ‘good leader’. They were asked to talk about the most important values and beliefs they held at different periods of their life, how they perceived themselves as leaders, and so forth.
Furthermore, when the top managers answered the relatively open questions in our interviews, they often developed themes of their own interests. It was within these themes that I gained knowledge about each person as a unique individual with distinguishing characteristics. For example, in Mary’s case, athletic endeavours are a way she proves her leadership qualities amongst male executives. She would choose to elaborate her story by focusing on this matter. For Anna, it is particularly crucial that her appearance conveys a powerful image, so she chooses to talk more about that aspect.

I have conducted multiple interviews with all five sporty top managers, Adam, Martin, Dan, Anna and Mary. I interviewed them in different venues on various occasions. The first meetings typically took place in the office of the research participants. In the first meetings, I normally went through general questions about their biography. I asked general questions which would encourage them to describe their lives, including their childhood, upbringing, education and career development.

In the follow-up interviews, the aim was to gain detailed information about particular topics the top managers were interested in developing. In these interviews, my intentions were to focus on how each top manager interpreted their experiences in athletic endeavours to express who they are or whom they want to become as leaders. I listened to how they expressed their emotions and senses, how they perceived the importance of their appearances in the leadership role etc.

Transcriptions of these interviews typically contain much more enriched information that is not restricted by the outline of the interviews. For example, I took note of their outfits, their voices, their facial expressions etc. I wrote down my impressions of them and the changes in my impression of them while we were getting to know each other better. During the research process, I tried to extract major values, beliefs, goals and concerns they expressed in their verbal communication about their athletic endeavours. In addition, I took notes of their comments about other lifestyle factors such as diet or sleeping habits that are related to their athletic endeavours.

Observations

In Goffman’s term, to observe how people ‘act’ is to understand how people ‘perform’ their roles in social life through controlling “expressive information” about themselves (1959). In addition to the interviews, I use the method of observation in this study. This is, to obtain information about moments when top managers use their gestures, clothing or modify their verbal expressions to reinforce value expressions in the process of self-presentation.
I have followed some of the top managers both at work and at sports competition sites. I observed these top managers’ interactions with the press and photographers and I paid attention to their interactions with employees. With these observations, I focused on how the top managers adjusted expressive apparatus such as verbal expressions and expressions of emotions and shaped appearances to create a coherent image of themselves.

Other materials
Apart from interviews and observations, I have collected secondary materials about the top managers from social media applications. I am connected with most of the participants on Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. Social media has become a site where people construct an idealized image of themselves (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This is an alternative source of information about the top managers. For example, Mary has a blog in the web version of a daily newspaper where she posts her daily exercise routines, diet and interactions with her children and friends. Dan likes to post his exercise routines on Facebook. By following his posts, I have obtained more information about how he managed to modify the shape of his body through rigorous physical training.

The secondary materials about the top managers are also available in newspaper articles because some of the top managers maintain relatively high profiles in the press. Interview articles about the top managers provide information about how they seek to be perceived through public media as athletic leaders. I therefore collected newspaper clips and online articles about many of my research participants between 2009 and 2014.

Recording method
Moreover, during fieldwork, I kept audio records of interviews and video recordings of some sports competitions in which the research participants were involved. I used audio and video recording methods in cases where I had permission from the participants.

Field notes
I kept field notes throughout the whole research process. As mentioned earlier, I took field notes in which I described the environment for interviews or observations; I noted the appearance, clothing, voice and facial expressions of participants. In addition, I took notes of my own thoughts and reflections about the environment of each meeting, as well as my impressions of participants.
4.2 An interpretive study

Interpretation lies at the centre of this study. The content of descriptive data and the verbal expressions of the top managers are interpreted by the researcher. The dramaturgical analysis is built upon the operationalization of theories of self-presentation. In the meantime, the content of the analysis is also informed by knowledge on athleticism, as well as considerations of the leadership context. Hence, the analysis of the self-presentation and the discussion of the results from this analysis contain layered interpretation. I explain the knowledge basis of these interpretations in more detail in a later part of this sub-section.

Two principles are vital for interpretive research. They are “experience near” and “experience distant”. The “experience near” concept concerns descriptions of experiences of participants and their own interpretation of these experiences, whereas the “experience distant” concept concerns the interpretation of participants’ experiences by the researchers (Geertz, 1974, 1975).

On this note, Geertz explains that in interpretive studies, the “experience-near” concept refers to information provided by research participants, which they might naturally and effortlessly use to define what they see, feel, think, imagine and so on, and which they would readily understand when similarity applied by others (Geertz, 1974: 56; 1975). An “experience-distant” concept is one that specialists of one kind or another, or an analyst, experimenter or ethnographer, employ to forward their scientific, philosophical or practical aims (ibid.: 56-57).

The interpretive researcher is therefore responsible for reporting and understanding the reality that is reported by informants that is experience-near, including his or her straightforward subjective reflexivity in a situation. In the research on the formation of self, researchers often depend on biographical descriptions - that connect very intimate self-stories and personal histories of participants to a specific interactional situation - for meaning-generating accounts (Denzin, 2001a). These descriptions outline a participant’s reality, describe his or her subjective reflexivity in a situation, and reveal their interpersonal relation with others and the way they describe the social surroundings.

The biographical descriptions help the researcher to “rescue” and “secure” the meanings, actions, and feelings that are presented in actors’ articulations of experiences (Geertz, 1973 in Denzin, 2001a: 116). On this note, Denzin (2001a) states that reporting ‘realities’ of participants - that are biographical,
connecting very intimate self-stories and personal histories to a specific interactional situation - is the premise of further theoretical interpretations (Denzin, 2001a). Hence, in this study, I bring forth participants’ experiences and their interpretations of experiences in athletic endeavours in the form of reporting their stories.

Furthermore, interpretive researches assume meanings of expressions situate in the world of lived experiences on two levels: surface meaning (intended) and underlying meaning (unintended) (Denzin, 2001a). In order to bring forth the underlying meanings that reside in participants’ experiences, the researcher should enact “experience distant” interpretations through a theoretical reading of the ‘reality’ of the participants in a situation.

In this study, the “experience distant” content of the participants’ reality is accomplished through layered interpretations. Firstly, in the dramaturgical analysis, I operationalize theories of self-presentation by enacting four main elements in the theories in the analysis. This way, the dramaturgical analysis ‘turns’ the stories of the top managers into a process in which the top managers create and express an imaginative view of themselves.

According to Geertz (1973; 1975), interpretive researchers may enact multiple sets of theories to ‘translate’ the social reality in order to render rich understanding of the phenomenon in interests. Following this notion, in my study, within the analysis of the self-presentation, I also use previous literature on social interpretations on meanings of athleticism to understand how the top managers’ generate meanings in their interpretations of athletic endeavours in the self-presentation. For example, using this literature, I am able to understand how the top managers negotiate a gendered (masculine) sense of self, how they express their views on bodily ideals or self-disciplinary behaviours through interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours.

Finally, I discuss findings of the analysis of the leadership context to render yet another layer of understanding of the phenomenon of self-presentation of the sporty top managers. This is to place the top managers back in their role as leaders and to illustrate yet another layer of the meaningfulness of their self-presentation. Hence, the self portrayed this way contains expressions of meaningfulness on personal, interpersonal and social (organizational) dimensions. I explain these three phases of the research process in a more specific manner in following sub-sections.
4.2.1 Presenting the data

Following the “experience near” principle, I present stories of five sporty top managers. These stories contain observational information and transcriptions of the interviews. The empirical data is presented following themes that are extracted from our interviews, such as “childhood and upbringing”, “current work situation”, “health ideals”, “lifestyle approaches”, and “views of a good leader”. In this study, the life stories of sporty top managers are presented chronologically, from these top managers’ childhoods to their current position as leaders in their organizations.

Moreover, when presenting the stories of the top managers, I use observational information such as how they look, how they speak and act, as well as how they use verbal expressions to link different “meaning frames” to describe their experiences in athletic endeavours in their stories. The observational information adds to the descriptive nature of the stories. For example, I begin each story with observational information in the section “first meeting”. The straightforward descriptive information also aims to illustrate my interaction with the top managers.

Bracketing the main theories

I present the stories of the top managers by following the “experience near” principle. At the same time, I ‘bracket’ the theories of self-presentation in the back of my mind. Therefore, the data presented serves the purpose of a dramaturgical analysis of the self-presentation. On this note, Denzin clarifies that an interpretive researcher needs to keep the intention of the study very clear, even at the stage when presenting the data to readers (Denzin, 2001a: 43). The researcher is to bring forth a description of the reality of participants and, based on that, the researcher in turn offers an alternative understanding of it with theoretical interpretations (Denzin, 2001a; Gadamer, 1975).

During the research process, I have obtained a wide range of information about how the top managers understand their life and work situations in general terms, their health ideals, lifestyle approaches, as well as ways in which they interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours by relating to their leadership role. According to theories of self-presentation, the formation of one’s understanding of self involves meaning creation in a broad scale of self-expressions addressing four major elements. They are: the understanding of the situational characteristics, the description of self that is compatible in such a situation, the relation with others, as well as ways in which people carry out “expressive control” in order to convey a coherent self-image to others (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012).
Hence, when reporting participants’ experiences in thick descriptions, I do not have to eliminate information that does not directly respond to “who they are” or “whom they want to be” in a literal sense. Rather, I include all the information that concern the top managers’ “childhood and upbringing”, “current work situation”, “health ideals”, “lifestyle approaches”, and “views about a good leader”. It is within this broad scale of information that the top managers have “pieced together” their understanding of themselves as occupants of the leadership role (Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012: 548).

I report the reality of the participants by ‘bracketing’ major elements that are involved in the process of the self-presentation, to ‘secure’ and ‘preserve’ a space in the stories of the five top managers for further theoretical interpretations.

**Keeping the “experience near” content in stories**

The stories of the top managers presented in this study are meant to provide “experience near” information about the participants. Although the stories are being told through the writing of the researcher and with ‘bracketing’ theories in mind, the content of the stories is strictly based on the top managers’ actual utterances and actions during the research process. However, at this stage the interpretive researcher needs to balance the illustration of the reality of participants and their theoretical view of the phenomenon. Thus, the “experience near” principle demands that the researcher both stay “in tune with the subjects’ actual experiences” (Denzin, 2001a: 125) and prepare to “construct interpretations of interpretations” (Mottier, 2005: 7; Gadamer, 1975). In order to present stories of the top managers that maintain “experience near” content of the reality of the participants, I make the following efforts.

First, I present the stories of the top managers following ‘facts’ that are articulated by them. During the interview process, I have asked the research participants to talk about their lives in general terms, including their childhood and upbringing, their career development and current work situation, their lifestyle approaches, as well as their views on ‘good leaders’. I thereby present the stories by following these themes. Second, I use direct quotes articulated by the top managers in many places in their stories to reflect ways in which the top managers use verbal expressions to convey particular meanings about themselves.

To keep the “experience near” content is to understand how narrative skills and devices are used in when people create ‘plots’ of their experiences to preserve particular meanings (Denzin, 2001a). Language use is a crucial place where expressions of values, beliefs, goals and concerns may be found in
social actors’ narratives (e.g. Schlenker, 1980; 1985). People use narrative skills to compose unique communications. By doing so, they privilege values and beliefs in temporal chains of interrelated events or actions. Stories adhere to the narrative form and are bound by a plot, with which people convey the understanding about themselves to others (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; 1985).

Moreover, it is crucial to report ways in which social actors express their interpretations of an event. It illuminates how storytellers use creative devices in verbal expressions to ‘manufacture’ an imaginative self-image that is expressive of a particular set of values and beliefs. For example, social actors tend to direct readers’ attention towards a specific attribution of motives; they establish causal links, attribute responsibility for something to a subject or object; they make remarks on significances of other interactants, attribute qualities to people, environment and events; they enact expressions of emotion, denote agency in a phenomenon and they proclaim providence (Gabriel, 2000: 36).

Furthermore, when people construct ‘plots’ in their stories, although they try not to depart from facts, they often use verbal techniques to reveal deeper meaning within these stories (Burke, 1962, 1974; Goffman, 1974). For example, social actors enact narrative techniques to link historical memories to the present event in order to convey important values that compose a major part of their understanding of self (Schlenker, 1980).

Hence, to present how the top managers describe their historical and present experiences by preserving the “experience near” ‘originality’ I fulfil two research objectives. First, I offer readers an illustration of the reality of the participants. By reading these stories, readers may gain a basic knowledge of who the participants are, what kind of important events they have undergone in their lives, how they view their lives, and others, as well as themselves, as leaders etc.

Second, I present the stories of the five top managers by staying close to ways in which the top managers use narrative skills to direct readers’ attention to particular advantages of specific values and beliefs that are vital for their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role. Both objectives serve as the base for further theoretical interpretations and obtaining a deepened understanding of the research participants.

**The use of the observational information**

Geertz states that it is common for an interpretive research to provide a “pure” description of the setting (Geertz, 1973). In this study, when I attempt to keep
the “experience near” content of the reality of participants by citing or rephrasing their verbal expressions, reporting ways in which they construct plots in storytelling, I also use the observational information to provide descriptions of our interview settings, the appearance of the top managers, the ways they use voices, clothing etc.

This descriptive observational data is mainly extracted from my field notes. In a dramaturgical research, descriptive information as such illustrates the surroundings where social interactions occur; and it provides basic information about the setting where social actors present themselves as if actors were playing their roles (Goffman, 1959).

Furthermore, I use the subjective evaluations in field notes as part of the descriptive data. For example, I describe Adam as expressing his emotions, Anna as being extremely conscious about how she dresses and I describe Mary as wanting to be competitive amongst ‘the guys’. These somewhat subjective evaluations are the results of my interactions with the participants, which I have noted in field notes during interviews or observation. Although this information reflects my impressions of the research participants, it is illustrative of the situation where my interactions with the top managers occur.

In addition, observational information contains description of moments when the top managers modify and adjust the informational cues about themselves. The observational information regarding the top managers’ performative expressions is presented in the form of the reformulating of certain verbal expressions, their particular attention to shaping appearances, the manners in which they style and groom themselves, as well as their expressions of emotions and feelings (Brissett & Edgley, 1974; Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1985).

According to dramaturgical theories of self-presentation, social actors not only convey important values, beliefs and concerns through verbal expressions, but they also ‘perform’ “expressive control” to avoid any discreditable informational cues about themselves (Goffman, 1959: 51). By providing descriptive data in the stories of the top managers, I intend to ‘preserve’ meaning-creation cues, which are more implicit than explicit in the process of self-presentation. For example, I observe that top managers alter and modify some verbal expressions in order to convey messages such as ‘facing failures like real athletes’; they attempt to ‘dress up properly’ to show off a muscular physique; they tend to give particular symbolic meanings to some emotions and bodily senses etc. Although these performative expressions do not articulate particular values explicitly, they contain information about values and beliefs that people hold.
4.2.2 A dramaturgical analysis

The responsibility of an interpretive researcher is to bring forth the underlying meanings of the event through unfolding, presenting and analyzing the “experience near” empirical world (Denzin, 2001a). To present stories of the five top managers is to “secure” and “rescue” expressions of meaning in the subjective experiences of the participants (Geertz, 1973 in Denzin, 2001a: 116). Hence, the stories of these five top managers are the premise of a thick interpretation of the process of self-presentation (Denzin, 2001a).

In the dramaturgical analysis, I operationalize theories of self-presentation as well as sociological understanding of the notion of athleticism to interpret the stories of the top managers. According to theories of self-presentation, people use verbal expressions and narrative skills to construct stories about themselves to convey an imaginative view of themselves to others (Schlenker, 1980; 1985). This imagination contains wishful notions they desire to fulfil. Moreover, the ways in which people ‘perform’ such wishful notions facilitate the maintenance of a coherent impression of the imaginative view of self (Goffman, 1959).

Hence, the analysis of self-presentation is to bring forth the hidden value expressions; in other words, the wishful notions about themselves that the top managers articulated in telling stories of their experience of athletic endeavours. In this study, I use a dramaturgical frame to illustrate the process in which the top managers use verbal expressions - that concern their evaluations of situational characteristics, the imaginative ‘script’ of the role, relations with others, as well as performative expressions - to articulate important values, beliefs and concerns about themselves. Prior to introducing the dramaturgical frame that is used in this study, I briefly explain how dramaturgy has been incorporated in social research in the following subsection.

Dramaturgy and social research

As mentioned in Chapter 3, theories of self-presentation are developed from Goffman’s dramaturgical study on the “Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (1959). In his study, Goffman uses dramaturgical metaphors to explain how an individual presents an “idealized” rather than authentic version of herself. Moreover, viewing social life as drama, Burke (1974) proposes that dramaturgical analysis facilitates our understanding of human behaviour and their explanation of that behaviour (Manning, 1999; Benford & Hunt, 1992).

A dramaturgical approach to social life typically facilitates analysis of human conduct by focusing on social acts and emergent meanings in the very moment
when expressions are articulated. The analytical scope of dramaturgy often goes beyond the study of rhetorical strategies (Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford, 1986; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). It considers a plethora of additional processes associated with the social construction and communication of meaning, including formulating roles, self-presentations through managing expressive performances, controlling information, sustaining dramatic tensions and orchestrating emotions (Benford & Hunt, 1992).

Burke (1962; 1974) proposed five dramaturgical accounts (motives) for human conduct and used five key terms as generating principles. They are: (1) Act - what is being done in thought or deed; (2) Scene - the background of the act, the situation in which it occurs; (3) Agent, the person who performs the act; (4) Agency - how the act has been carried out, its instrumentation or means; and (5) Purpose - why the act is done (Edgley, 2003: 142; Burke, 1974).

Viewing life as a stage and people as engaging in performances on the stage, Goffman (1959) uses dramaturgical metaphors to describe various episodes of performative acts that people carry out in everyday social life. By using dramaturgical metaphors to indicate different thematic features in the process of self-presentation, the researcher is able to illustrate the continued presence of a person, in which the individual tweaks his/her behaviour and selectively gives and gives off details about the understanding of self (Tseêlon, 1992).

Influenced by Goffman’s work (1959) and Burke’s (1962) proposal of dramaturgy as an analytical instrument in social science, social scholars have developed analytical frameworks with various dramaturgical terms, and used them in different types of social scrutiny. For example, Benford and Hunt (1992) use a dramaturgical frame composed of four dramaturgical moments: scripting, staging, performing and interpreting to illustrate how social actors collectively define, redefine and articulate expressions of power in social movements.

Moreover, in leadership studies, Avolio and Gardner have built and used a dramaturgical model to analyze the Impression Management strategies that leaders use to solicit desired attributes to create charismatic images and to nurture a charismatic relationship with followers (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). The authors point out that leaders are like social actors; they present themselves in ways that they believe facilitate a charismatic relationship with followers in work settings. As social actors, the charismatic leaders construct a social reality by managing meanings through the verbal communicational technique of framing, based on which they outline expected behaviours for themselves according to their understanding of the social role as leaders in
scripting; they manipulate symbols, including physical appearances and props in self-presentation, in staging. Lastly, in performing, leaders enact presentational strategies to construct the charismatic relationship with followers (Gardner & Avolio, 1998).

My study on sporty top managers’ self-presentation is inspired largely by the dramaturgical notion in social research in general and by the study by Gardner and Avolio (1998) in particular in analytical terms. I build the current dramaturgical analytical frame based on the four “essential elements” provided by theories of self-presentation (e.g. Denzin, 2001a: 70). That is, people initiate a self-presentation process through evaluating situational characteristics, describing a ‘role-script’, relating to others, and by controlling informational cues. Hence, I use dramaturgical metaphors such as the “scene”, the “script”, the “cast” and “performance” to indicate each dramaturgical episode in the self-presentation process.

Using this analytical frame, I process stories about the top managers in the theoretical operationalization. I interpret the content of their stories upon social understanding of athleticism. Based on this, I analyze what they say about themselves, about the social situation and other people, how they control self-expressions to perform ‘who’ they want to be as if they were ‘on stage’ to create and perform the ‘desired image’ as leaders.

A dramaturgical analytical frame

I use a dramaturgical frame to study the self-expressions (including both verbal expressions and performative expressions) of five sporty top managers in the process of self-presentation. I explain how the top managers express values, beliefs, goals and/or concerns to convey “wishful notions” about themselves as occupants of the leadership role. The dramaturgical analytical frame contains four parts. They are the “scene”, the “script”, the “cast” and “performances”.

The four dramaturgical phases in self-presentation of the charismatic leaders are interrelated following four main elements of theories of self-presentation (Schlenker, 1980). All the dramaturgical episodes are sequentially interrelated and necessary in accounting for the formation of the leaders’ conduct. They “piece together” various aspects of expressive information about the self in one cohesive dramaturgical frame to feature self-presentation as an integration of the evaluation of the situational characteristics, an understanding of the self on a social role, and the evaluation of the values of others in social interactions (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Schlenker, 2012).
Setting the scene

Firstly, a scene in dramaturgical research is defined as the context of a situation where self-presentations occur. Burke defines the dramaturgical metaphor, the scene, as “the background of the act, the situation where it occurs” (1962; 1974). In other words, social actors tend to frame meanings through developing a plot about their experience when they describe the nature of the situational characteristics. By doing so, they pave the way for articulating other persuasive expressions about themselves in this “scene”.

Typically, people tend to organize their verbal expressions to frame “a quality of communication that causes others to accept one meaning over another” (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996: xi) as if “setting the scene” in a play to pursue persuasiveness in their stories in front of audiences.

The dramaturgical episode of “setting the scene” thus aims to illustrate how leaders define the situational characteristics, including their perceptions of social rules, social regulations, other important situational cues in a particular social context etc. (Schlenker, 1980; 1985). The analysis of “setting the scene” is to respond the first research question on how the sporty top managers assess situational characteristics of the context of leadership situation when talking about their engagement in athletic endeavours.

In this part of the analysis, I focus on verbal expressions that are value-laden and express an evaluation of the nature of the situation in which they are situated. Furthermore, I pay attention to the ways in which the top managers use narrative skills to shape a particular understanding of the situation. In this study, the top managers talk mostly about the social situation in which they grew up and are currently situated through describing their experiences in “childhood and upbringing” and in “current work situation”. The analysis of “setting the scene” is therefore mainly anchored in verbal expressions in these two parts of storytelling.

I examine how the top managers use verbal skills and expressions to form important themes in the ‘plot’ regarding their “childhood and upbringing” and “current work situation”. For example, most of the top managers emphasize that they have benefited tremendously from an engagement in athletic endeavours from an early age. This shows that they attempt to link currently held athletic values with historical events. I thereby look into how they enact verbal skills to frame possible interpretations such as that their early life experiences in athletic endeavours are a major contribution to their current success.
Furthermore, I examine how they manage meaning expressions to address the most important values in life and work by creating a ‘plot’ of the situation, how they define the essential rules, rituals and regulations that are relevant to these values in their daily work and how they define their own role in this ‘plot’ etc. For example, some top managers use assertive statements to clarify that athletic values prevail in their social or organizational situations. By doing so, they highlight athletic values as well-acknowledged and universally accepted norms.

Many top managers also talk at length about their initiatives in managing health in the workplace. They refer to health ‘issues’ as one of the most important topics on the managerial agenda and assert that athleticism is the most efficient solution for building a good value base in organizational cultures. Based on this setting, they continue to elaborate rules, interventions and regulations in ‘healthy organizations’. In addition, when telling their stories, the top managers also unanimously stress their role as leaders in leading the ‘healthy organizations’.

Expressive informational cues as such inform the audience (the researcher) that we all situate in a social environment where becoming healthy with heightened athleticism is central. Hence, we are in need of leaders who are capable of leading us in ‘healthy organizations’. In order to accomplish this objective, we need leadership, interventions, regulations and rules that are relevant for building the healthy organization. By focusing on verbal expressions that articulate the definition of norms, rules and regulations in a situation, I am able to understand how the top managers compose the meaning-basis of the “scene”, which sequentially leads to the ‘scripting’ of the self and other persona that are involved in the same frame of the scene (e.g. Schlenker, 1980; 1985; Goffman, 1959).

**Scripting**

Secondly, building on the “scene”, social actors typically identify different characters in social interactions by assessing the role of themselves and others (Benford & Scott, 1992: 39). The dramaturgical metaphor of a “script” refers to verbal lines and directions for actors in a staged play, which is built upon the framing of the “scene” (Benford & Hunt, 1992:38).

In dramaturgy, scripts are often built upon frames of meanings that are constructed in the “scene”, which provide the collective definition of the situation (Benford & Hunt, 1992). The term has been used to explain the development of sets of directions that outline expected behaviours (Benford & Hunt, 1992:38).
In this study, the term “script” is used to illustrate how the sporty top managers describe an imaginative view of themselves that is consistent with the situational characteristics. The “script” typically contains detailed descriptions which the top managers believe are generally compatible with their assessment (or definition) of the situational characteristics. The analysis of “scripting” is intended to answer the second research question of how the top managers describe an idealized image of themselves.

In the analysis of “scripting”, I focus on the top managers’ articulations in their stories where they talk about personal information such as “lifestyle approaches”, and “views on a good leader”. I extract value-laden expressions that concern behavioural directions, aesthetic ideals, feelings, emotions, moral codes, as well as status as leaders etc. Expressions that contain modal verbs of obligations strongly facilitate the expression of wishful notions. For example, I observe that the top managers often say “I need to be fit”, “I have to look healthy” or “I must appear energetic”, when they talk about aesthetic values, or behavioural directions that contain wishful notions about the self. These expressions are therefore seen as indicators of imaginative notions in “scripting” that concern aesthetic ideals, moral codes, behavioural routines etc.

**Casting supporting roles**

Moreover, when people construct an imaginative view of the self, they also tend to strengthen this image of self through defining others (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Cooley, 1922). In our imagination of others’ view of ourselves, we tend to believe that the image that we attempt to convey to others ‘fits’ the gaze of others’ (Cooley, 1922). Hence, the imaginative view of the self involves our imagination of others, because the “expressive implications of [others] tend to confirm [our] detailed and imaginative view of [ourselves] as an occupant of a position” (McCall & Simmons 1966:72).

In this study, “casting” refers to the others who occupy the supporting roles to the major character on the stage (Benford & Hunt, 1992; McCall & Simmons, 1966). I use the dramaturgical metaphor of “casting” to describe ways in which the top managers identify different others to ‘confirm’ their own imaginative view of selves. In a social situation, we imagine and interpret the responses of others to shape and convey our own understanding of self to others (Cooley, 1922; Blumer, 1969). We also define the identities of others based on values and beliefs we hold.

As elaborated in the previous sub-section, ways of “casting” others are methods through which social actors express values and beliefs to construct the self-presentation that serves the actors’ self-interests (Goffman, 1959).
The analysis of “casting” is intended to answer the third research question on how the top managers define their relations with others. I intend to understand how the top managers express values and beliefs through defining their relations with others in “casting”.

In our interviews, the top managers have mentioned ‘others’ in almost every part of their stories, even when they were not specifically asked to talk about others. For example, the top managers talk about their parents in “childhood and upbringing”, they talk about their peers, employees and bosses in “current life and work situation” etc. They also talk about different reactions of employees towards health promotion initiatives that they have proposed and implemented in the workplace. Therefore, verbal ‘plots’ about others ran through their stories.

The ways in which people talk about others reveal their intention of conveying their own understanding about selves (e.g. Charon, 1989). I therefore pay attention to the verbal expressions with which the top managers talk about other people in every part of their stories. I distinguish how the top managers categorize people in different groups by judging their attitudinal expressions. For example, from their utterances about one group of people towards whom they express overt respect and the utterances with which they express contempt or pity, I am able to interpret that they label people in different categories based upon athletic values, lifestyle factors, and their physical capacities.

Performance

Last but importantly, this study pays attention to ways in which the sporty top managers articulate important values, beliefs, goals and concerns about themselves by using “expressive control” in “performances”. Performance is the central concept in Goffman’s work (1959). Goffman’s main argument is that people perform a representative surface act, which they believe is adequate in the eyes of others in a given situation. In the meantime, they also make efforts “to conceal and underplay activities, facts, and motives that are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products” (Goffman, 1959: 48). Hence, the purpose of “expressive control” is to “foster the impression that the routine they are presently performing is their only routine, or at least their most essential one” (ibid.: 48). With performances as such, social actors seek to ‘live up’ to values and beliefs that they “give” about themselves (Goffman, 1959:55).

According to theories of self-presentation, in order to present themselves with the “desired image”, social actors engage, intentionally or unintentionally, in performative strategies (Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006; Brissett & Edgley,
1974). These strategies generally indicate two things. First, they illustrate, “whom they want to be”. That is, social actors express the values, beliefs and goals that compose the imaginative image of self. Second, they reveal concerns and anxieties about the information that they intend to hide. Social actors ‘perform’ in order to fulfil both aforementioned objectives to strengthen the coherence of the image they intend to convey to others.

In their research on people with disability, Charmaz and Rosenfeld find these individuals carry out “visibility and informational control” to hide their disabilities when they desire to appear in public as capable and ‘normal’ as others (Goffman, 1959; Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006). This type of performative behaviour is often carried out to address our concerns about the discrepancy between “who we want to be” and “who we (actually) are” (Goffman, 1959; 1974). In other words, people strive to present themselves to others with the version of self that is a “little better” than they really are (Cooley, 1922; Goffman, 1959).

The perception of the discrepancy between the realistic self and the imaginative self often causes concerns and anxieties. While expressing such concerns and anxieties, we may obtain some profound knowledge about the imaginative views social actors hold about themselves. In other words, we understand ‘whom they want to become’ through understanding what they try to avoid being seen as (Goffman, 1974; Charmaz & Rosenfeld, 2006). Therefore, examining how sporty top managers enact “expressive control” is another way to gain knowledge about the values, beliefs and concerns that compose their understanding of self in the process of self-presentation.

People control expressive information about themselves in various ways. They use language, clothing, gestures and posture, or may alter their expressions of emotional and bodily senses to present an “infallible image” of themselves (Goffman, 1959). For example, soldiers wear uniforms to indicate and reinforce their professional authority; police officers adjust their posture when confronting criminal suspects to display their law-enforcing authority.

Hence, in this study, the scrutiny of “performances” is anchored in social actors’ behaviours in “expressive control”. This part of the analysis responds to the last research question on how the top managers enact performative strategies to avoid any discreditable information about themselves. By unfolding this process of “performances”, I am able to gain nuanced knowledge about what type of values, beliefs, goals and concerns the social actor intends to convey through repressing some aspects of visibility in different social circumstances (Burke, 1962; Goffman, 1959).
In the analysis of “performances”, I pay particular attention to the top managers’ verbal expressions or actions that concern “performative strategies”. For example, I observe that some top managers re-formulate expressions about their experience of failure, others use clothing, and they adjust expressions of emotions and feelings for self-presentational purposes, or they seek to hide some expressions that they believe may damage the imaginative image they try to present etc. With these performative expressions, the top managers seek to convey the particular type of values that they acknowledge and embrace.

To take an example, in this analysis, I observe that the two female top managers control feminine appeal by engaging in athletic endeavours. With reference to literature on the gender aspect of social interpretations of athletic endeavours (Crossett, 1990; Keane, 2009), which argues that women tend to use athletic behaviours to present manliness in some social circumstances, I point out that in ‘performing’ the self this way as women in top positions, the female top managers express concerns about their gender identity. With athletic endeavours, they attempt to acquire masculine qualities as leaders and, in turn, strengthen their embracement of a masculinized culture amongst leaders.

The audience

The audience is an important element in a dramaturgical concept. In this study, I focus on examining the process in which the sporty top managers carry out self-presentational practices in self-expressions to attempt to induce an idealized impression. Viewing the top managers as performers on the stage, the audience that they intend to address with self-presentational practices takes different forms. First, the audience is the ‘imaginative others’. As stated in the previous chapter, people tend to address “imaginative” others when they carry out self-presentational practices without the actual presence of others. Some scholars use the notion of the “inner audience” to address the invisible others (e.g. Greenwald & Breckler, 1985: 126; Hogan, Jones & Cheek, 1985; Schlenker, 1980, 1985). That is, people ‘act’ as occupants of the social role seeking to satisfy the demands that they imagine others may impose upon them.

Second, also as stated earlier, I, as a researcher, serve the function of the audience for the top managers’ self-presentational practices. In many interactive moments in the research process, I believe the top managers speak and behave in particular ways to attempt to impress a positive impression on me. Third, in observational settings, the sporty top managers interact with other audiences such as journalists, photographers and co-workers.
The audience in this study mainly takes the aforementioned forms. In this study, the analytical focus however lies in the top managers’ self-presentational practices. I pay attention to how different others are being referred to by the top managers. Hence, audiences in this study are being ‘bracketed’ as the background of the top managers’ self-presentational practices (Schlenker, 1980, 1985).

4.2.3 Layered interpretations

As mentioned earlier, in the dramaturgical analysis, the content of the analysis contains layered text. The interpretations are generated mainly by theories of self-presentation, literature on the social interpretation of athleticism, and some prevailing notions about leaders and leadership.

I pay particular attention to how the top managers mobilize narrative skills when they develop specific plots in their stories about the athletic endeavours. I draw on social interpretations of the notion of athleticism to understand sporty top managers’ stories about their experience of athletic endeavours. For example, I study how the top managers link their bodily endeavours with work-related experiences, ideals etc. At the same time, I am also attentive to the expressions with which they describe themselves as leaders, and/or how they outline an idealized scenario about themselves being a leader and about their performance in leadership. This is to understand how the top managers interpret their experience of athletic endeavours to highlight values, belief and concerns that they hold in constructing an imaginative view of themselves as ‘fit’ leaders.

Layered text in the dramaturgical analysis of self-presentation

Furthermore, the interpretive research does not intend to provide the knowledge that “[carries] the guarantee of truth and objectivity”; rather, it provides “systematic, rigorous, coherent, comprehensive, conceptually clear, well-evidenced accounts, which make their underlying theoretical structure and value assumptions clear to readers” (Hall, 1996a: 14). That is, there are other layers of meaning structure underneath the process of self-presentation. It is thus the researcher’s responsibility to bring the layer (or layers) of meaning structure out of the surface of the phenomenon (e.g. Alvesson & Asheraft, 2008).

In interpretive research, researchers typically “bracket” the phenomenon by primarily reducing it to essential elements according to a theory or a set of theories (e.g. Denzin, 2001a: 70). Following this, researchers “construct” or reconstruct the phenomenon and provide an understanding, or new understandings, of it (Denzin, 2001a, 70).
Furthermore, according to Geertz (1973; 1983), interpretive researchers may enact multiple sets of theories to ‘translate’ the social reality into interests. For example, in Geertz’s (1973) study on cockfighting, he uses Freudian concepts of ‘id’ and ‘ego’ to explain the motivations of Balinese cock-fighters. He discusses the actions of the cockerels in terms of the Platonic concept of hate while at the same time comparing the “text” of the cockfight to a Shakespearean play. Geertz enacts three sets of theories in his analysis of cockfighting and concludes that all texts create subjective understandings for their readers based on the researchers’ interpretations. Different layers of interpretation thus bridge the understanding of the phenomenon, from its “surface meaning” to “underlying meanings” that are situated in social theories (Geertz, 1973, 1974, 1975). With this, Geertz once again confirms that social researchers do not report the social world as “it is”; rather, through interpretation, they “inscribe” culture by drawing parallels between diverse phenomena, and they apply social theories to reconstruct the phenomenon of interest (Lather, 1991).

In this study, theories of self-presentation provide the content of essential elements. Hence the empirical data is initially understood as the self-presentation of five sporty top managers, where they compose important impressions of self through evaluating situational characteristics to “set the scene”, outlining desired qualities of themselves through “scripting”, strengthening the imaginative view of themselves through defining “casting roles”; and attuning to the imaginative view of themselves in ‘performances’. Hence, the first layer of analysis is built upon theories of self-presentation.

Furthermore, within the dramaturgical analysis of the self-presentation, I bring in another layer of interpretation by processing the content (utterances and actions) of the self-presentation through social theories on athleticism. In this layer of the interpretive analysis, I focus on examining how sporty top managers talk about their experiences in athletic endeavours to convey aesthetic values, to express themselves as gendered individuals (e.g. Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Courtenay, 2009), to address their social status (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990), and to articulate work-related competences etc. I also pay attention to how they align different meaning frames to emphasize who they are or/and whom they want to become.

By enacting multiple sets of theories, I am able to establish an interpretive construct of the ‘reality’ of the top managers. In this interpretive conduct, the top managers enact athletic endeavours to present themselves with a desired image of self. In this process, the top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to negotiate their social landscape, such as defining...
themselves as gendered individuals and presenting their competences in their professional role etc. (e.g. Courtenay, 2009; Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011).

Discuss analytical findings by "bracketing" the context

According to Goffman, social actors carry out the presentation of self to convey an understanding of the self that is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful (1959). In order to understand the meaningfulness of self in all three dimensions, Schütz (1976) argues that interpretive researchers need to “bracket” the context in which the general understanding of social actors’ experiences is expressed. That is, while allowing the participants to speak on their own terms about their own experiences, researchers need to rigorously consider the context such as “who is speaking, and under what circumstances” (Bakhtin, 1981: 340).

The same values expressed by people occupying distinctive roles in social life may have different meanings. Hence, the interpretive researcher needs to “reconstruct” social actors’ interpretation of their behaviours by considering potential indications these interpretations may induce in a specific context.

This study is mainly interested in how the sporty top managers present themselves as occupants of the leadership role. Only by “bracketing” the context and allocating the self-presentation in the top managers’ particular social encounters, may we understand how the self-presentation is meaningful on personal, interpersonal and social dimensions (e.g. Goffman, 1959).

Based on this notion, in this thesis, Chapter 7 serves as both a discussion of the findings from the dramaturgical analysis of self-presentation, and another layer of interpretive understanding of the self-presentation of the top managers in a leadership context. I discuss the findings from the dramaturgical analysis by considering the leaders’ unique position in the organizational context in the chapter on “Becoming athletic leaders”.

In Chapter 7, I situate the top managers in their leadership role. I discuss how the findings of the self-presentation fulfil the top managers’ personal pursuits of ‘whom they want to become’ as leaders. I explain how this self-presentation addresses the interpersonal nature of leadership such as the inherent power feature of “inclusion” and “exclusion” (e.g. Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Domhoff, 1987). I discuss how this self-presentation emphasizes the role of leaders in terms of meaning-management in organizational “wisdoms” (e.g. Smircich & Morgan, 1982). This way, I bring forth the nuanced content in the formation of the sporty top managers’ sense of self as occupants of the leadership role on personal, interpersonal and social dimensions.
The interpretive researcher

Scholars have pointed out that value-free interpretive research is impossible, because every researcher brings his or her own preconceptions and interpretations to the problem being studied (Denzin, 2001a: 43; Gadamer, 1975). Moreover, interpretive researchers must explain how certain conditions came into existence and why they persist with the theories of their choice (Denzin, 2001a: 43). Hence, the researcher has a vital role in the interpretive social research (Denzin, 2001a; Geertz, 1973). The interpretative researcher bears the responsibility both to bring a phenomenon to the focus of the research attention and to re-construct the phenomenon through a theoretical lens (Gadamer, 1989; Denzin, 2001a).

Moreover, interpretive research typically departs from providing a thorough description of the reality within actors’ own conceptual (interpretive) frames (Denzin, 2001a). Yet an interpretive researcher is not responsible for merely providing a mirror image of the participants’ reality; rather, the researcher should “construct interpretations of interpretations” through “‘read[ing]’ the meaning of cultural texts by writing in turn his/her own texts” (Mottier, 2005: 7). In this process, subjective attributes of interpretive researcher may come to influence the research process and the interpretation of the data in different ways depending on the context of the research process (Gadamer, 1989). In this dramaturgical study on the self-presentation of a group of top managers, I, as an interpretive researcher, may therefore have influenced the research process in the following ways.

First, Gadamer (1989) argues that the first responsibility of an interpretive researcher lies in straightforwardly addressing the lived experiences of actors and recognizing how this experience is mediated by language, performances and the reflexive nature of the research process. In this study, I fulfil the first responsibility of interpretive research by ‘reporting’ the “experience near” information of the sporty top managers in the form of stories while “bracketing” theories of self-presentation.

Second, in a dramaturgical study of the self-presentation, as a researcher, I hold interviews with top managers, and I present them in various work settings or competition venues to observe their behaviours. In the research process as such, the top managers primarily present the image of themselves in my presence in these circumstances. Hence, I become the immediate audience of their performances. The presence of a researcher is not a normal setting for the top managers. Although the self-presentations of social actors are mostly “self-relevant” (e.g. Schlenker, 1980:6), the presence of a researcher may still have some impact on their self-expressions. The top managers may have
sought to “impress” me by evaluating the values, beliefs and goals that I hold and thereby believing they should behave accordingly.

Third, Gadamer (1989) emphasizes that the identity and the role of the researcher is crucial in an interpretive process. This means that a researcher’s identity attributes such as gender, class, race or nationality may come to influence the research process and the interpretation of the data (Mottier, 2005: 8). For example, in my field notes, I wrote my own subjective reflections on the research participants’ attitudes, appearance and use of language. In these descriptions, I may have expressed my views about the participants by relating to my own identity, which is foreign, ethnic and female. These identity attributes may have determined my attention to particular self-expressions of the top managers that maintain indications of hegemonic masculinity, or other types of power constructions.

Moreover, as a female ethnic researcher, I may have shown particular interests in “struggles” that other female peers have to undergo in their work situations. I may have revealed sympathetic, empathetic and compassionate feelings towards the self-expressions of female peers in this research, but less so towards the male participants. As a result, the illustration of the reality of the research subjects may be ‘tempered’ to some extent by the subjective position of the interpretive researcher.

However, social reality is not an objective existence with homogeneous points of view. Rather, any understanding of social reality is constructed by views from the various standpoints of different social actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Interpretive research that to a moderate extent projects the social reality from the point of view of the researcher ought to be able to represents valid reflections of the social reality for some people (Gadamer, 1989; Denzin, 1989). Hence, such interpretive data is seen as a legitimate source of knowledge for the social phenomenon of interest (ibid.).

Fourthly, interpretive research does not “re-tell” what has been said by participants. Rather, interpretive researchers produce an alternative understanding of the phenomenon through theoretical interpretations of the participants’ ‘reality’ (Gadamer, 1989; Aspers, 2009). According to Gadamer, in interpretive research, the researcher’s choice of theories influences the research process and the presentation of the underlying meanings of the data (1989).

When the interpretive researcher anchors his or her view of a phenomenon in one perspective, he or she is responsible for bringing that aspect of reality to the readers through the conduct of the research (Gadamer, 1989; Denzin, 1989, 2001a). The choice of theories defines the nature and the standpoint of
this study. In this study, I move away from the mainstream trend that typically views athletic endeavours as a self-evident positive factor with which leaders enhance individual health, and which improves efficiency and productivity at work. Rather, I aim to gain deepened insights into the values, beliefs, goals or concerns the top managers would like to express in terms of their sense of self as leader through communicating their athletic endeavours. Therefore, in addition to the main theories on self-presentation, I also enact sociological theories on athleticism and sport behaviours to provide a critical interpretation on the top managers’ self-expressions. Hence, my choices of theories have predefined the nature of this research.

Finally, “knowing and comprehending the meaning that is felt, intended, and expressed by another” is another way the interpretive researcher may influence the interpretive process in a research study (Denzin, 1989: 120). Denzin (2001a) points out that it is not only analytical and conceptualizing skills that are vital for interpretive researchers, but the competence to understand actors and their performances, as well as their lived experiences, is also important. The latter requires the researcher to come ‘closest’ to the experiences of the research subjects (Denzin, 2001a).

In order to gain the competence of “knowing and comprehending” meanings of the experiences in athletic endeavours, I began to work out more frequently and started to engage in the type of sports that the sporty top managers take part in. I have participated in an annual 10-kilometre running race that takes place in Stockholm since I started the research in 2009. In my own engagement in athletic endeavours, I experience an enhanced sense of self-fulfilment when I set a personal record; and I feel a sense of dissatisfaction when I fail to meet goals. In addition, in order to build a common ground for our conversation, I began to discuss the results of my running races with the top managers. Through these efforts, I am able to comprehend how the top managers link their experiences in athletic endeavours with meanings that are vital to their sense of self.

4.3 Research ethics

This is a study about the self-presentation of a group of sporty top managers from Sweden. The study aims to reveal important values, beliefs, goals and concerns that the top managers intend to convey through building a “desired image” of themselves in self-presentation. The study focuses on the self-expressive aspect of people’s experiences in athletic endeavours. These expressions may contain very intimate, personal emotions, senses and feelings.
A fundamental principle, which underpins all ethical codes relating to social research, is the welfare of the research participants. For the study of a person’s selfhood, the most important ethical code stipulates that the identity of the participants must be kept confidential and anonymous.

Most of the participants in this study are used to public exposure. Their frequent public exposure has two consequences that concern ethical issues for this study. First, none of the five participants is sensitive about exposing their real identity in my research. Second, it is difficult to keep their identity completely anonymous. However, it is the researcher’s responsibility to protect the genuine identity of the participants. The following procedures have been implemented in this report in order to ensure the protection of confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

First, I am aware of the necessity of closely protecting the participants’ real identities and I have given all the participants a pseudonym. Second, I keep the names of the organizations for which the participants work confidential. Third, I have renamed the awards my participants have been nominated for or been awarded.

Second, this study involves personal information about the participants including aesthetic values, bodily senses, feelings and emotions that are related to athletic endeavours. The participants have generously revealed information about situations in their private lives. With the premise that the participants' identities are kept anonymous, I include personal experiences, expressions of bodily feelings and emotions in this study. Given the aim of unpacking the linkage between lifestyle behaviours and the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role, information that involves people’s actual experiences in athletic endeavours serves as an important source of knowledge for this study. I have therefore asked participants for verbal permission to use this type of personal information in this thesis.

Finally, my research participants are successful in their careers as CEOs, Regional Directors, Country Managers and so on. They are familiar with the type of report whose purpose is to promote their reputations and success stories. I have been honest and straightforward when communicating the purpose of this research. I have clarified that this study is a social analysis of the athletic endeavours of top managers. The research does not therefore aim either to promote any type of behaviours or to compose a particular type of success story about the top managers. Rather, I clarified that this thesis was intended to give the athletic behaviours of leaders an alternative reading through the lens of social theories.
4.4 Limitations

I consider several issues that may potentially lead to limitations in this study. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, some participants in this study maintain high public profiles. To continue with the discussion on the issue of ethics, when providing an extensive description of the research participants, I am concerned that there is a risk that the identity of participants may be recognized in some cases.

Secondly, following the “experience near” principle in data presentation, I present the data by closely following what has been said and done by the participants, and what has been seen and felt by the researcher. Some of the “rich data” may be perceived as excessively sufficient. Following dramaturgical theories of self-presentation, the purpose of providing rich data in this way is to portray a full picture of the research participants as if providing vivid views of performers on the stage. The ‘excessive’ information about them may help the reader to understand the characteristics of these top managers, with which they develop an impression of their own of the participants. Presenting data this way facilitates the recognition of certain traits of those research participants in the chapter on analysis and discussion.

Thirdly, the stories of the five top managers are structured slightly differently for each participant. This is due to the semi-structured interview method used in this study. This research method allows the participants a certain degree of freedom to elaborate on some aspects of their experiences in athletic endeavours more extensively than other aspects. This varies between the participants. At the same time, the ‘uneven’ structures in each story illustrate the unique characteristics of each participant despite their common interest in athletic endeavours. Yet, his ‘limitation’ reflects an interesting insight about the fact that similar values, beliefs and concerns may be expressed in distinctive ways by different participants.
5. Stories of five sporty top managers

In this chapter, I present stories of five sporty top managers. The stories contain ‘layered text’. Following face-to-face interviews and observations, I include the respondents’ portrayal of their upbringing, their description of their sporting activities, the current work and life situations, their views on the role as leaders in their respective organizations, as well as my description of their actions, appearance and sometimes gestures. These stories illustrate how respondents interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours in both distinctive and convergent ways.
The first meeting

I first met Adam in the autumn of 2010. Before our first meeting, I had read a report about him in the business press which told of his sporty lifestyle and athletic endeavours. I made the first contact with him over the telephone. He sounded enthusiastic about my research and agreed to be a part of it. Adam happily accepted my request for an interview and invited me to his office for our first meeting. We agreed to meet early, at 8 am. When I came into the meeting room at his office, he was already sitting there waiting for me. Adam looked full of energy. He is a sturdily built, well-proportioned and well-trained man. Wearing a dark grey jacket, a casual shirt and a pair of dark jeans, he reached out his hand to shake mine and smiled. I recalled that in the business press, Adam often appeared in his training clothes. Yet vibrant energy still managed to shine through his smart jacket. “This is one of my casual business days,” he said. “I don't have any customer meetings booked so we can talk for a long time.”

We decided to grab a cup of coffee in the office cafeteria before the interview. It surprised me that there were already quite a few others in the cafeteria having a morning cup of coffee and chatting. Adam seemed very easy going as a CEO. In the cafeteria, he introduced me to his employees and started to chat with them casually about the recent races they had taken part in. I observed that the majority of employees are male engineers around 40 years of age. They greeted me in a friendly manner and started to talk to Adam. “So what are you doing about Vasa (Vasaloppet)?”, one of the guys asked Adam. “I’m not sure about my knees this year…,” he answered, and explained that “this guy often challenges me to Vasaloppet and marathons. I have plenty of rivals like him in this office.” The guys joined in the laughter.

Back in the meeting room, there were two sandwiches lying on the table. “I got up at four today, so now I am having my second breakfast. I thought you might want a sandwich, too,” he said, grabbing one sandwich and offering me the other. How very considerate, I thought. Unlike Adam, this was my first breakfast of the day. We kicked off our first interview, each with a sandwich in our hands. When Adam started talking about his training and exercise, his
Adam’s story

Childhood and upbringing

Adam is in his late forties. When he talked about his childhood and upbringing, he seemed enthusiastic about the values that his parents had passed on to him. He talked at length about the different skills and knowledge he has learned from his parents.

Adam was born into an entrepreneurial family environment. His grandfather founded an energy engineering consultancy company. Adam’s father led the company before he handed it over to Adam in 1999. Adam is the oldest of three siblings and has two younger sisters. They grew up in a highly competitive environment. Adam’s parents are both very sporty people. His father is passionate about tennis, and his mother competed in athletics when she was young. The family maintains a tradition of doing sport together by organizing a tennis tournament each year.

Adam told me that he believed his father began to prepare him to be a leader when he was four years old. Sport, engineering and public speaking were three things included in his “leadership education”.

I started to play tennis when I was only four years old, as part of the “leadership education”. Well, in the same year, my father also gave me an electrician’s tool box to play with. He started to educate me to become an electrical engineer early.

My father tried to educate me to become an electrical engineer, and a leader. It was always me who had to give a speech whenever we had an event at home. I still remember the embarrassment in the beginning. I understood later that my father was preparing me to be a CEO. Everything makes sense now.

Adam received his Master’s Degree in engineering from one of Sweden’s most prestigious Institutes of Technology. The major he chose for his postgraduate studies was also the main branch of technology that his family consultancy firm was involved in: energy solutions. Adam worked in different jobs after receiving his degrees. “My father helped me with the network… but
most of the time I worked hard and just tried to find my own path in life,” Adam said. Today, Adam is grateful for the meaningful and purposeful upbringing his parents gave him.

*I did a lot of different things before taking over as CEO of the company. After graduation, I spent all my vacations working as ski instructor or tennis coach. This way, I got to ski and play a lot of tennis while making some money. You see, I lived for sport. Later on, my experiences in sports paid off greatly in my career as a CEO.*

**Adam’s current work situation**

When Adam was asked to describe his current work and life situation, he liked to emphasize the importance of his role in the current developing state of the company. He describes himself as the person who has single-handedly turned the company around, and who has made the company a ‘healthy’ one that later received an award as one of the most attractive workplaces in Sweden.

Yet, all this has been a tough process for Adam. Adam did not know he possessed leadership qualities until he took on the task of reviving the family legacy. Today, he is growing the company aggressively and with determination. He proudly said that he had been prepared for becoming a leader since he was a boy in the best ways.

**A self-reliant CEO**

Adam told me his career took a major turn when he was 32. Before that, he thought he would be working as an engineer for the rest of his life.

*My father’s company was in bad shape and my father was about to sell it. I was in shock when I got the call from him asking whether I would like to give it a try. I had never thought of running a company, dealing with reports and managing people. I even had problems staying still when I was growing up. I thought being an engineer would suit me because I would be active all the time. But now when I think back, my father had been preparing me all that time to take over the company, both physically and mentally.*

Without any previous experience of managing a company, Adam said he quickly found his way of being a leader. He expanded the business in the electricity supply network in Sweden, and developed other business areas such as telecommunications. He also introduced environmental technology, which later became a major business in the company, as a separate expertise, all in a short period of time.
Adam’s role in the company’s major expansion after the year 2000 has been significant. When I met Adam for the first time in 2009, the company had around 850 employees and most of the business activities took place mainly in the Nordic countries. The company has grown rapidly since then, both organically and through mergers and acquisitions. Today, the company is diversified geographically and has operations in Finland, Norway and Russia, as well as in Sweden, and the number of employees has reached 1,500.

Adam is obviously proud of what he has achieved in growing the company. When he was asked about the secret of his success, he attributed his success to the major values the company promotes: family and health. Although the company issued public shares a few years back, strong family values have remained under Adam’s leadership. According to Adam, he is able to make correct choices in life and to lead his company in the right directions based on these values. “It is you who make the choices every day. You are the person who makes the right or the wrong things happen to you,” Adam added.

The front page of the company’s brochure features a portrait of Adam’s entire family. “I would like to make my employees to feel that we are a family. I care about them as if they were my own family members. I want to make my employees succeed in their lives, like my father has prepared me for my success today,” Adam told me proudly and confidently.

Adam added ‘healthy’ as one of the value watchwords of the company when he took over the position of CEO in 2001. When he gives the first lecture on the management training course, he often introduces the values of family and health to new members of the middle management team. The company’s middle management team is responsible for different business areas affiliated with different regional offices.

When I accompanied Adam to one of his management training courses, I observed that the group of middle managers was composed of twenty men in their mid-forties. They all appeared to be muscular, fit and vibrant. I noticed that during the introductive lecture Adam talked mainly about his athletic endeavours, sporting activities and competitions; during the break, the discussions amongst the managers were mainly about marathons, and the Vasaloppet and Vätternrundan races.

Adam’s company sponsors its employees with the registration fee for these races. Interestingly, the new middle managers who join the company are interested in the same type of sports and races as Adam is. Adam delivered the speech below when he spoke to the new middle managers on the management training course.
I have loved sports since childhood. Being active, athletic and healthy has been an important value in my upbringing, career development, as well as for the success I have managed to achieve. You will be leading different local offices and business areas. You will help me to pass on the messages of the company values to other employees. Fortunately, most of you are also passionate about sport, just like me… To date, our company has been known in the industry for promoting values such as ‘healthy’ and ‘sporty’. I attract ambitious and competent people to my company with this reputation, and you will help me to strengthen our values.

Managing a healthy organization

When talking about the current work situation, Adam concentrated on talking about his initiatives to promote the ‘healthy’ interventions in his company. Adam supports the implementation of several interventions in health promotion programmes. An in-house health consultant helps Adam with health management. The company applies health screening programmes in order to establish health profiles for each employee. “This way we will be able to recognize individual health problems.”

According to Adam, three categories result from the health screening programs: the ‘healthy’ group, the ‘in need of help’ group and the ‘unhealthy’ group; they are labelled with the colours green, blue and red respectively. Adam believes he is able to influence people who do not live a healthy lifestyle by putting some pressure on them.

I talk to people who fall into the red categories about their lifestyle issues. They need to do something to become healthier ... it is helpful to put people in different groups. It gives them a better understanding about themselves. Some of them do become very encouraged to change their state of health.

Adam also emphasizes that health is not only a lifestyle, it is also a personal responsibility, which is needed at work. Adam is a very down to earth type of CEO; however, when talking about the “right” attitudes and the sense of responsibilities about work, his face grows serious.

People need to be professional at work. That means you need to show up at work in good shape and full of energy. I would say something to anyone who comes to an early morning meeting with an obvious hangover. I make these comments in a nice way in the meeting so that they feel a bit ashamed.

In order to sustain the value of ‘healthy’ in the organization, Adam also invests in generous health promotion subsidies in addition to the regular health screening programmes. Adam has a ‘balance sheet’ to explain this. “Keeping
your employees healthy is a cost-effective action. Every krona I invest in my employees’ good health, gives four times the return on investment.” The return on investment, according to Adam, is highly enhanced productivity, efficiency and reduced absence due to sickness. In addition to this, Adam also believes that creativity can be stimulated through an active lifestyle. Therefore, Adam is very proud of this equation of his creation. He talks about it on different occasions such as in meetings with investors, in the company’s social activities, as well as with the media.

Moreover, Adam awards some employees for their performances in sports activities with the full payment of gym fees. These individuals are also acknowledged in the company’s newsletter. By doing this, Adam hopes to introduce a monetary incentive to those who obtain good results in major races such as the marathon, Vasaloppet etc. He sees these rewarding and incentive practices as one of the company’s competitive advantages over other private businesses in the industry.

The value of ‘being healthy’ is a great thing. It makes employees more energetic, productive, and efficient. And it gives my company a good name. I promote this value to attract the best workforce for my company. Many outstanding engineers come to work for us for this very reason. They like the healthy culture in my company.

When Adam talked about the prototypical outstanding employees he wanted to attract to his company, I recalled those I had been introduced to in the office cafeteria, the male engineers in their forties, looking fit and in good shape. Adam has indeed achieved his goals, I thought.

Adam’s health ideals

When Adam described his current work situation, he put ‘healthy’ in the centre of the discussion. He repeatedly emphasized the positive effects of the ‘healthy organization’. I asked Adam to describe his healthy ideals to me.

For Adam, a healthy person is someone who leads an active, sporty lifestyle. Healthy also means the ability to stay strong in many unexpected circumstances in life. This person should be able to maintain the “correct” attitudes to the injuries, pain or even suffering that is caused by sports activities, because these sensations signify the improvement of one’s health.

Although Adam defines healthy in several ways, he seldom addresses its opposite, unwellness and illness. I brought up the question of sickness, of illness in the workplace. Adam seemed almost reluctant when talking about
illness in general. But he proudly told me that in his company, problems such as unwellness or sickness are taken care of by the professionals; whereas the healthy culture he is building in the organization not only prevents people from becoming ill, but it also makes people more competitive at work.

Fitness, health and athleticism

For Adam, being active, sporty and athletic is a way one becomes healthy. Good health, according to Adam, is achieved through tireless effort. Adam believes that fitness of the body is the outcome of diligent physical exercise, and such physical effort says a lot about the quality of a person.

*Once you lose control of yourself, your body becomes less fit. Similarly, being in control of a professional situation begins with keeping your body under control.*

Adam believes a healthy lifestyle changes a person’s life. He is grateful for the values that his parents instilled in him as a child. He insists that the athletic lifestyle has made him a healthy person and a successful CEO. Adam would therefore like all his employees to look as fit as he does and be as healthy as he is. In Adam’s mind, people get to know others from judging their appearance. A fit appearance implies many good qualities.

*To be able to control your life, and to keep your body in good shape, is naturally a symbol of being healthy to me. That is why I would like all my employees to be as healthy as I am. People get to know others from judging their appearance. I believe that the type of activities a person engages in in their spare time says a lot about the professional quality of that person, too. If I were choosing between two candidates who were equally qualified for the job, I would definitely choose the one who looked fit and eliminate the oversized one. I mean, the fit person must have more to offer.*

The ‘right feelings’

Adam explained that being a good leader is also about taking constant action to improve oneself. Although he appears to be always healthy and full of energy, Adam has had many injuries resulting from his training. When I asked him how he related the idea of being a healthy role model for others with his experience of these sports-related injuries, he admitted that he might have stretched his physical endeavours too far.

*I might not be the perfect example for others since I injure myself quite often in sports. I know I have done too much ... But you know, the pain and injuries also make me a stronger person. You recover from these injuries just as if you*
conquer another life obstacle. I think only those who exercise a lot and those who have been through similar pain can understand this wonderful feeling.

Adam defines bodily sensation such as muscle aches and pains in his unique way. According to Adam, these painful sensations resulting from a good workout are like the discovery of yet another untrained part of his body.

I actually like the pain it leaves me with. It reminds me of my exercise and the part of my body that I need to exercise even more. Isn’t it the same feeling when we are facing difficulties and finally overcome them? Some of my colleagues and I like to discuss our injuries caused by doing sports. We share similar experiences, which make us understand each other better, and become closer.

Adam thinks that talking about injuries and aching muscles is a way he and his (male) co-workers bond with each other. Adam frequently used “we” to describe the special solidarity between him and his colleagues that is based on similar bodily sensations. In addition, he highlighted the sense of empowerment that often came with the painful sensations.

Injuries are frustrating. They stop us from maintaining the regular routines of physical training. We understand this frustration. We know that injuries are inevitable. We (the other sporty managers and I) often talk about injuries, since they are rather common in the types of sports we engage in. But the most important thing is that you also feel highly empowered. I think the pain and joy you get from exercising resembles the feeling when you achieve some good results after hard work.

However, not all physical experiences are encouraged as a topic for casual conversation. Headaches, stress-related health problems such as insomnia, physical aches and anxieties are not amongst those bodily ailments which are a popular topic of discussion. Adam believes that these health issues ought to be dealt with in private. Talking about illness or feeling unwell at work can lead to a negative atmosphere, according to Adam.

Healthy people are in general more positive. We have professionals to help people with health issues. Many of these health issues are caused by unhealthy lifestyles. I hope people can learn to live healthy lives. That is why we have ‘healthy’ as one of the company’s value watchwords.
Illness

When talking about illness and absenteeism in his company, Adam emphasized the importance of making the right choices in terms of the lifestyle factors of health.

You see, this is about making choices in life. Choosing what you eat, what you do in your spare time. I hope people can do what I do. Still it is an individual choice. I can’t force anyone to do what I do, either. I try to influence people as much as I can.

Physical fitness is also seen as a resource to handle unexpected and undesired life events. One of Adam’s children has a serious heart condition. They have been in and out of hospitals for treatment for a long time. Adam believes that without a high level of physical fitness, he would not have been able to handle a situation like this. The same applied to his divorce. “I was completely drained of energy and motivation. I was able to ‘run off’ the anxieties. Thanks to my healthy lifestyle and physical fitness I was able to survive these life tragedies.”

Adam’s lifestyle approaches

Sport makes up a large part of Adam’s life. As far as Adam is concerned, maintaining an athletic lifestyle is the reason he has succeeded in many things. Adam exercises for at least two hours every day. He engages in many sporting disciplines. He trains with former elite athletes and professional instructors in tennis, downhill skiing and CrossFit, amongst other sports. An ordinary day for Adam starts with either a run or a swim early in the morning. Between 10 am and 11am, he often plays tennis with a coach. A typical day ends with another hour or two in the gym. “Unfortunately there are only a limited number of hours every day, so I have to prioritize. I don't watch TV, for instance.”

Not only does Adam take athleticism as a lifestyle, but he is also keen to be competitive in many sports. For example, in tennis, he is ranked 527 in the country among men over 45 years old. His best ranking is 454. Since these ranking results are based on accumulating points, Adam believes that he is amongst the top 10 in his age range in Sweden. Performance, ranking and competition results are obviously very important for Adam.

Moreover, for Adam, being persistent in physical training requires the ability to prioritize his life and having a disciplined mind; and being sporty and active in athletic endeavours helps him to develop disciplinary skills.
For me, being persistent in doing anything requires a disciplined mind. For example, I try not to use the car, I walk or use the bike; and I always take the stairs whenever possible. Life is about making the right choices and prioritizing your time to do the right things.

I learn to discipline myself in doing sports. I also learn to compete with others and with myself. I love to compare my sporting performances with others. I keep track of the results of my performances in running, swimming, skiing and so on. I simply want to improve and perform better each time.

“Facing changes and challenges like a real athlete”

Adam also uses his sporty lifestyle as a buffer to painful experiences and changes in his life. Between 2012 and 2014, Adam experienced several major changes to his life. While he was engaged in an aggressive expansion of his company and business, his family unfortunately fell apart. In the spring of 2012, he went through a divorce after thirteen years of marriage. The turbulence in his private life was one of the reasons he later stepped down from his position as CEO in 2012 after thirteen years in order to spend more time with his children. Instead, he worked as the Executive Chairman of the Board between 2012 and 2014.

Adam takes family values very seriously. Therefore, when his marriage fell apart, the first thought he had was that he had “failed so badly”. After the divorce, he felt the need to re-direct the focus of his life back towards his children. He shared his emotions with his employees. He exercised more intensively than ever. When I met Adam for the first time after his divorce, he looked distressed and exhausted. However, he insisted that he was “feeling great”.  

It felt like losing a competition that I was determined to win. Doing sports has helped me greatly in facing challenges and changes such as this in life. By spending more time in the gym and exercising, I was able to forget about my problems for a while and focus on improving myself. I think a real athlete does the same when they fail to win a competition. They also need to stay focused and do more work to improve.

Adam said he had been very honest with his employees about his divorce. He needed to talk about it with others.

I felt better sharing my feelings like this. I know that normally we need to keep our private life apart from the work environment, but I think I come closer to my employees this way. You know, letting my employees know that I could be
happy, sad and excited is a way I became closer to them. I think a leader should show his emotions more often. I think my employees appreciated it.

When we met again six months later, Adam finally admitted that he had felt extremely stressed and depressed during the time he was handling the divorce. Yet he had only been able to address the pain, the stress and exhaustion after he had recovered from it.

Well, although I needed to talk about my divorce with others, I didn’t want to show despair. I still wanted to show others that I am strong enough to overcome any difficulties. Now my employees can see that I have overcome another obstacle in life.

Parenting

Although going through changes in his life, Adam has not changed his athletic lifestyle. Adam believes that his faith in an athletic lifestyle has helped him overcome obstacles in his life. After the divorce, Adam began to spend more time with his children. They spend time doing sports together. One article about Adam and his leadership in the industrial press, showed a photo of him “planking” in front of the TV with his youngest daughter sitting on his back. In that article, he told the journalist that physical training is crucial for a leader, because it helps leaders to bond with employees at work. Sports activities are important for parents, too. They can be done whenever and wherever you are. And you can have fun and quality time with your children.

After a series of changes in his life, Adam said he became more confident both in his private life and as a leader. Adam was more determined about the ‘healthy’ value in life. He began to encourage his children to be more involved in sports, and in the management of sporting clubs.

My parents were my mentors in life. Although I was extremely uncertain about becoming the CEO in the beginning, I am now quite confident that I have leadership qualities within me. I managed to inherit this from my parents and my grandparents, and I will pass it on to my children. I need to guide their lives in the right way.

Apart from my five-year-old, my youngest son, all my children play tennis. I encourage my children to do sports and to be involved in the management of sport clubs. For example, they are already involved in the management of the tennis club and golf club in our municipality. They also attend my company’s board meetings sometimes, just like my father encouraged me to do when I was a kid.
“Shaping a ‘healthy’ culture”: Adam’s view of a good leader

When Adam is asked about his views of a good leader and about himself as a leader, he repeatedly mentions his contribution in adding ‘healthy’ as one of the company’s visions. He believes that being and becoming ‘healthy’ is his secret for being a successful leader.

When I met Adam the next time, he had just stepped down as CEO, and he felt “not needed” any longer in the daily operations in his company. Although he still went to the office every now and then, he felt like an ‘outsider’. During that period, he often came to our meeting in jeans, a casual pullover and unshaven. Our meetings during that time were filled more than ever with talks of his visions of a good leader. He worried that the value he managed to nurture in his company had faded.

Adam often quoted Charles Darwin to emphasize the need to “fit into the leading role”. Darwin said, “It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive. Rather, it is the ones who are most willing to change.” Adam sees no direct satisfaction in being healthy, but the core of good health for a leader is the idea of “becoming” better.

I believe good health is the key to leadership. What we do to stay in good health is to constantly improve ourselves, to challenge both physical and mental limits so that we become even better.

Adam’s vision of being a good leader has always been of shaping the culture of the company with a focus on building a healthy lifestyle. He is convinced that his passion for promoting healthy lifestyles by encouraging sporting activities makes him the most ‘fit’ leader for the company. Only a year after stepping down as the CEO, Adam became a little anxious about the changes and reorganizations taking place in the company. He realized that as the Executive Chairman of the Board, he was no longer able to have a direct influence on the company.

You could say that I am on a long vacation; but I am not resting. Finally, I can travel to different offices and inspire people. I am involved in many projects in a few leadership research centres and executive associations. I am doing sports. I meet wonderful people all over the world. The one thing I have concluded is that fitness and a great mind go together. I talk about it with people and they all love the idea. A business newspaper would like to do another series of articles about me and my leadership approach soon.
When talking about his visions of being a good leader, he continuously used terms such as “we”, “my company”, “my dreams” etc. as if he had never left his position as CEO.

Well, I hold a different view about being a good leader. I like to build the company culture, motivate my employees and to set up future strategies. I think this is what a leader should do. Instead of sitting by the desk and dealing with numbers, I prefer to be an inspiration to my employees. In my company, we talk a lot about sports, competitions and healthy living. I think I am responsible for passing on these values to my employees. Somehow, I feel as if I have taken over my father’s role not only as CEO, but also bringing my values to others and changing their lives as my father did to me when I was a kid.

“To lead others both at work and in life”

Adam defines a good leader as a person who inspires and motivates. He believes that he fulfils these criteria with the values and beliefs he holds. Adam admitted that he would like to go back to the position of CEO and to make changes in the company. He was afraid the company culture was fading away. The watchword ‘healthy’ had been removed from the company’s website. “I feel as if a legacy that I was responsible for establishing is disappearing,” Adam said.

A good leader is always ready to inspire and motivate others. The ‘healthy’ culture that I built represents my leadership. With that, I inspire my employees to live a healthy life, and to work with a lot of energy and creativity. Now, it is not there anymore.

Adam emphasized, “A modern leader is a person who can lead the life of others”. He has indeed made efforts to change other people’s lives. In his opening speech at the company’s 50th anniversary celebration, there was a very affective quote from him:

I came to the mountain area of Sälen many years ago, I smelled the fresh air, and I felt great. Ever since then, I have wanted to make everyone in my company be in good shape and I hoped that everyone in my company could for at least once in their life stand on the starting line of Vasaloppet, because this experience will change their lives.

In addition, according to Adam, a leader who is able to lead the life of others is able to find the hidden sources of strength of others.
I believe there is an unlimited source of energy within each individual. What we need to do is to discover and motivate this capacity and explore the hidden source of energy. But the key is to do the right things.

Wanting to win

Adam often draws parallels between his ambitious manner in leading the growth of his business and his athletic endeavours. “Well, we need the risk-taking quality in doing business just as if we are winning an important match in sports competitions.” Based on this, Adam uses his philosophy about athleticism in many business occasions. For example, in one quarterly meeting with company investors at the bank (normally, each company has 30 minutes to present quarterly performances to strengthen the investors’ confidence), Adam spent most of the time talking about the health promotion investments in his company, and presenting his own engagement in sports. When he was giving that speech, he was full of energy, using gestures and posture to describe incidents that had happened in some of the competitions in which he had recently participated. Instead of actual financial performance, Adam presented the health promoting aspect of his leadership with the aim of convincing the investors about the profitability, sustainability and prosperity of his company.

I see winning and wanting to win as another necessary quality of a good leader. I often do sports with professional trainers; and I like to challenge people to a race. Winning over professional athletes makes me feel good about myself. It does not matter much if I lose to them either, but it means much more if I win.

In 2012, Adam initiated a series of “CEO Duels”, in which he challenged other public company CEOs. Eight CEOs answered his challenges in different sporting disciplines such as downhill skiing, marathon running, boxing, CrossFit, tennis, table tennis and bench push-ups. The events attracted much media and public attention. Many CEO participants saw this as an opportunity for their company to receive positive public exposure. A prestigious Swedish business daily has published a number of articles about this event. Adam also made sure the series of competitions became an internal communication film for the employees in his company. In the same year, Adam was given a European leadership award in recognition of his remarkable in leading his company through its significant growth from 200 employees to today’s 1,500 employees.

To become the most ‘fit’ leader

When describing his visions of the ideal leader, Adam likes to use himself as the example while drawing on professional athletes for supporting references.
Athletes are good at dealing with different situations in competitions. You do not quit a race just because the weather is bad, you are not feeling well, or something has happened in your private life. You deal with difficulties and carry on with the competition. This quality makes a most ‘fit’ leader.

For Adam, how a person looks provides strong evidence about how he or she is able to control their lifestyle and body. For a leader, appearance is important in the sense that “being in control of your life and body makes people trust you more”.

There is a TV programme called ‘You are what you eat’. I think you are ‘what you do’ and ‘how you look’. If you look healthy and fit, people naturally believe you are able to control yourself, discipline yourself and manage your own life. They will trust such a person to manage the company, too.

To influence others through role modelling

Adam believes that the secret of being a successful leader is to be a good example to others in all respects. He likes to “radiate” his energy and motivation to others. Adam is expressive with his emotions. He is an extrovert, warm and pleasant, and likes to influence others with his own emotions. He hugs his employees whenever he meets them. “For me this is a way to transmit affection and hopefully energy, too.” Adam hugs all his employees, from the management team to the cleaning staff. He stood up and hugged everyone who was passing by when we were having our lunch meeting in the lobby in his office building, as if he would like to effect change through these firm hugs. At the company’s 50th anniversary celebration in 2013, Adam and his sister stood at the reception in the resort and in one evening literally hugged all 1,200 employees who arrived from different countries and regions.

Adam is not only known for his own passion for sports and an athletic lifestyle, but he is also recognized as a CEO who makes a large effort in initiatives for collective health promotion. In our first interview, Adam proudly told me how he had almost single-handedly created the “healthy organization” that he is leading now.

According to Adam, his role modelling of the healthy lifestyle as a leader, together with efficient health interventions, has led to his company being recognized as a “healthy company”. Adam’s company came second at the “Most Healthy Workplace in Sweden” awards in 2010.
Celebrating the “healthy organization”

In the summer of 2012, Adam’s company celebrated its 50th anniversary. The three-day celebration was held at a ski resort in the well-known Swedish mountain range, Sälen. Sälen has been Adam’s favourite place since his childhood. “The mountains offer so much: fresh air, beautiful landscape. In the middle of the mountains you just want to run, ski, or take a walk.” And indeed, Adam filled the agenda of the three-day conference with sporting activities in various forms.

When the employees arrived, at around 9pm on August 24th, Adam and his sister stood at the entrance of the conference centre to greet them all in person. “We hugged everyone. That makes 1,200 hugs. I need them to feel that I care about every one of them and that I am one of them.” He also made sure that the hugs were sincere and warm.

The employees seemed to be in high spirits despite the long bus journey; many of them had even flown in from Norway, Finland and Denmark. Everyone picked up a backpack containing running gear, a map of the mountains and the conference schedule. Sporting activities, including a Mountain Challenge, took up a large part of the agenda.

The three-day event was minutely scheduled with presentations, entertainment and sports activities. The theme of sport and an active lifestyle ran through the entire event. People were encouraged to go jogging, walking, mountain climbing or swimming during the breaks. The new CEO was introduced to the entire company. In her speech, following her predecessor’s lead, she emphasized that she was “qualified for the job”, because she had done her Vasaloppet years back.

Adam made a presentation on stage every day, mainly talking about the company’s vision of ‘healthy’. He showed up on stage every morning with his usual vibrant, energetic look and delivered speeches about his passion for sports, healthy living and leading a company with healthy values. He presented a film based on his recurrent sport competitions with other CEOs. The film contained highlights of his winning moments. After the movie, Adam gave additional information about the number of competitions he had won and the very few unfortunate losses.

“I think people are motivated. When they see what I can achieve, they must know that they can at least try to make some progress in their lives,” Adam said, still feeling excited about his performance on the stage a moment earlier.
The highlight of the event was the Mountain Challenge. Almost the entire company of 1,200 people participated in the challenge. Everyone was dressed in a unified sporting outfit with a blue T-shirt and a pair of black running pants. They were expected to complete 81 checkpoints on the mountain.

The view from the hotel lobby was magnificent. The starting point was crowded with people in blue. When Adam gave a short speech to fire everyone up and announce the beginning of the challenge, the blue crowd rapidly, thinned into blue clusters and blue lines which quickly became fast moving dots scattered all over the mountain.

Although the blue spreading over the mountain was a truly impressive sight, there were a few (about thirty) abstainers who decided to stay in the hotel lobby and enjoy a few beers and a smoke. Some said that they were “not feeling very well”; others told me that they could not find the right sized outfit to fit them (large was the biggest size offered).

After three hours, people began to return and gather in the main conference hall. A celebration party was set up there with beer, water and sandwiches served. The conference hall started to fill up when even more people returned. Sweating, exhausted but excited individuals energized the atmosphere. On the stage, the winners’ names were announced. People were still in their sweaty sporting outfits, looking excited and exhausted; they were cheering, shouting out the winners’ names loudly, laughing and applauding. The atmosphere gradually reached its peak when all the participants came back to join the joyful crowd. Adam was truly proud of this event although his team did not win first prize. The fact that he had managed to bring along almost 1,200 people to a challenge like this was success enough for him. When he was asked how he felt about those who did not participate in the Mountain Challenge, he told me that most of them were in need of help and he would bring help to them. He looked confident and sounded determined when he said this.

Notes

Since our last meeting, Adam has been travelling frequently. He maintains his exercise routines and gives speeches in leadership education courses and in different organizations about the ‘healthy’ approach towards leadership. In 2014, Adam finally returned to his position as CEO. He was determined to reshape the ‘healthy’ organizational culture which he felt had begun to fade while he was away from the operational position. In 2015, Adam went to India
and began to challenge some CEOs and corporate executives in different sports. Nowadays, the company is heavily involved in charity work. It seems that Adam has expanded the notion of ‘healthy’ to yet another dimension, in which he hopes to make more changes to the lives of others.
Dan

The first meeting

The first time I interviewed Dan was in the summer of 2011. He had just settled in Sweden for his post as the Country President of the large international enterprise for which he has been working for almost twenty years. Our meeting took place in his spacious corner office.

Dan was formally dressed in a dark suit, a white shirt, and a tie, the colour of which matched his outfit perfectly. On Dan’s large desk there were two pictures. One was a family portrait with his wife and two children, their four-year-old daughter and ten-month-old son; the other was a crayon drawing of Dan on his bike. Dan later explained that it was an image of him during a seven-day 790-km bike ride in the Welsh mountains. One of his colleagues had made the drawing for him as a gift to honour his debut. We sat down at a small, round meeting table in front of his desk. Behind the table there was a tall bookshelf displaying a few travel books about his home country and another one about Sweden. Dan and his family had lived in Romania for three years before moving to Sweden. Apart from the travel books, the shelf was filled with Dan’s MBA text books and the company brochures.

Dan has a modulated voice, as if he is about to give a speech at any moment. His eyes sparkled when we started our discussion around the subject of health, athletic endeavours, self-development in life and leadership practices. Having been labelled as a “sporty boss” when he was working in another country, Dan said he was extremely passionate about the topics we were about to discuss. A few times during our meeting, Dan stood up, reached for the leadership textbooks from his MBA courses, and browsed through one of the books in order to give me some references which explain the correlation between athleticism, good health and leadership.
Dan’s story

Childhood and upbringing

Dan is in his forties. He grew up in a middle-class family in Ireland. His father ran a private business and his mother worked as a nurse. According to Dan, his parents were both passionate about sports. His father used to play rugby and his mother played hockey for several years. Dan had an older brother who also played rugby. “I remember I used to look up so much to my brother. He wore this rugby blazer from the team he played in…He was my idol.” Sadly, Dan’s brother died of a heart problem on the rugby pitch when he was only twenty years old. “I am very sorry,” I said after hearing this sad story. “It’s ok. The image of him in my mind is still how admirable he was on the field, and how handsome he looked in that blue blazer,” Dan replied with a smile on his face, as if he could picture that image of his brother before him.

Dan’s parents sent him to boarding school so that he would be able to combine sport with an academic education. “We had a few hours of different sports every day at school. So doing sports every day or being involved in some sort of match has been a habit for me ever since I was five.” Although introduced to a large variety of sports at boarding school, such as swimming, cycling, track and field, Dan spent most of his time playing football and rugby. “Well, rugby was the passion shared by the whole family. Both my father and my brother played rugby. It was natural for me to keep it up. When I think back, the team sports like football and rugby made me a collaborative person, a quality which I later benefitted a lot from in the beginning of my career years.”

Dan played rugby in the college team too. He told me the reasons why he was fascinated with rugby. “From a very young age I enjoyed the atmosphere on the field when watching a match. First you dance the traditional Haka to intimidate your rivals, and then you give it your all to win.” Dan said that he became obsessed with competing and winning because of the sports he did during childhood and youth. Today, he interprets the experience of playing professional rugby this way:

_I have learnt so much from playing rugby... for example, the importance of setting goals. Every achievement, both in life and work, is developed from the first goal that is set._

“Goal setting” and “goal achieving” have been the most recurring phrases in my conversation with Dan. For Dan, being passionate about an athletic
lifestyle is not only about keeping up the high degree of energy that his job demands; it is also about learning from athletes about the extreme focus on goal achievement. “When I was a kid, beginning with athletics, I learned that setting goals and achieving them is crucial for both self-development and to finally win the match. Later in life, both in personal life and the business aspect of it, I always set different goals. Now, I am here, having achieved most of these goals, I have a beautiful wife, two wonderful children and I am the Country President in Sweden.” Dan said this with apparent pride and confidence.

Dan and his beautiful wife met in college. “I impressed her on the rugby field,” Dan laughed, still very proud. “We got married in September. This was not what she wanted. She wanted either a summer or winter wedding. But September was the only month when I didn't do any athletics.” Dan’s wife gave up her job when Dan’s career took off and they started to live abroad. Both their children were born when Dan was in his overseas posts.

The company Dan has been working with for his entire career is one of the biggest international suppliers specialized in electrical distribution, automation and energy management. Dan started out selling industrial automation products and industrial controls to machinery manufacturers. He proceeded to manage sales for the Northern Ireland and Scotland regions, and then looked after half of England.

He eventually became the UK Commercial Manager in charge of the industrial division and then the Director of the industrial division. Over the years, Dan was promoted to become Sales Director and Business Unit Manager and later took up his first position as Country President in one of the central European countries. When he worked in that post, he made a lot of effort to organize sports activities for the company. “People spend their leisure time in different ways. But I think I have made some changes there.” Dan said that he was known as the “sporty boss” in that country office.

**Dan’s current work situations**

When talking about his current work situation, Dan emphasized two most important aspects in his work. The first was that he felt that in order to create a unified organizational culture, he had to adapt to the sporty culture in Sweden. For Dan, this was not a big challenge, since he was known as a ‘sporty boss’ in his previous posts. However, he said that he was still “positively surprised” by the sporty trend in Sweden, which made him feel slightly “pressured”. The second important topic Dan talked about was to “create a healthy management team” in his company. He believes that this is
the way to influence all other employees in his company to become active, sporty and ‘healthy’.

**Adapting to a sporty culture in Sweden**

Today the organization Dan is responsible for almost 1,000 employees and six business areas across Sweden. It is a larger organization than any organization he led previously, in terms of the number of employees, the range of businesses, and the annual revenue. The major workforce in this organization is made up of electronics engineers, electricians, mechanics and administrative personnel. It is indeed a male-dominated organization, which has only a handful of female employees in Finance, Human Resources, and Marketing and Communications.

Dan finds his current job challenging and exciting. He is particularly impressed by the manager-employee relationships. In his view, the Swedish organization is much more relaxed than his previous experiences in other organizations where the hierarchical relation was more salient. “People are not intimidated by managers here. Managing Swedes is an interesting experience for me. You need to impress them in many ways,” he said.

For Dan, the challenge of being a Country President in Sweden lies elsewhere, too. For example, Dan’s mark as the “sporty boss” no longer carries any distinction in Sweden. “Everyone in Sweden is very athletic and sporty.” He feels he is under constant pressure. “My employees would talk about other Business Unit Managers who had just accomplished different competitions or races, such as marathons, half marathons, the Lidingö Race etc. I feel that I am being challenged all the time.”

While Dan is truly impressed by the high motivation for sport among the managers in his organization, he also feels intimidated: “I have to start to exercise and get back in shape soon. Otherwise the employees will soon judge me as not being as ‘fit’ as other managers.”

Like Adam, Dan enjoys his job mainly for the ‘representational’ aspect. When our interview took place, Dan had managed to integrate the country organization to align with the corporate matrix so all the acquisitions became new business units under his leadership. With the new organizational structure, Dan went to the top of the organizational chart in Sweden. This re-organization enlarged his responsibility and authority both in the number of employees and the annual revenue. Yet at the same time, the new organizational structure delegates operational responsibility to the Business Unit Managers. This way Dan can be ‘freed’ from most operational works. He still travels abroad very often, meeting with the corporate management team
or representing the company in meetings with important customers, investors and local community representatives.

*Compared to the operational works, I much prefer to represent the company, build the culture and set up the strategy. After all, being a good leader today is more about how one represents the organization in the best way.*

**Creating a ‘healthy’ management team**

In Dan’s organization, the employees who exercise more frequently are engineers, office workers and management team members. The electricians and mechanics on the installation sites are often less enthusiastic about physical exercise. “But now I think there are more people starting to exercise. It is about good leadership and a strong company culture. Eventually everyone will be on-board.”

Dan believes that the strong leadership will bring changes in health promotion activities, too. “I will start with the management group,” said Dan, “and I’m sure, with more and more managers starting to exercise, eventually, there will be many others.” Unlike many other Swedish top managers, Dan did not say much about the organized health promoting initiatives in his company. He referred me to the Human Resources Department for more detailed policies for the formal employees’ health and recreation programmes. He seemed to believe firmly in the idea that managers are capable of leading the “health movement” for the whole company. He believes in the influencing effect of mentorship. “You should meet my boss, he’s extremely fit. He exercises a few hours every day; and he competes in all the challenging races.” Dan’s boss is the head of the Nordic/Baltic Region. Dan mentioned him as his role model and source of inspiration on several occasions. “He is full of energy, highly competitive at work and also in sports…He has influenced me a lot. So I am sure others can be inspired by me, too.”

Just as Dan had hoped, several of his division managers are now actively engaged in the Swedish Classic Circuit, in marathons and half marathons etc. Around 70 employees participated in the half marathon two years ago. The company subsidized the fee and provided sets of running gears. “Changes will gradually happen only if you are trying to influence people,” said Dan, apparently satisfied with the result of his influence. “You see, Facebook posts are able to inspire and eventually influence other people.” Dan is friends on Facebook with many of his co-workers and employees.
Dan’s health ideal

Sports, fitness and athleticism

When talking about health ideals, the topic began to centre around sports again. Dan called himself a “natural” in terms of being athletic. In Dan’s words, “living a healthy life is just my thing”. The ideal state of health is often expressed through the description of his recent sporting achievements, improvements in physical capacities etc. “Well, I used to run only 5 to 6 km each session, but now I can easily run 14 km. This means that you can always improve; if it works for me, whose body is not really built for running, then it should work for everyone.”

Appearing fit and energetic at work is another aspect of the health ideal. “It is important that you radiate positive energy through how you look. It is particularly important when you are a manager.” On this note, Dan referred to his MBA leadership course material. “You learn about the meanings of good health on MBA courses, too.” He told me that good health was emphasized in the management courses as the method to ease work-related stress, as well as a way for charismatic managers to motivate their employees. “When I read that text, I was really pleased. It proves that everything I’ve been doing is right.” Dan also emphasized the extended implications of being healthy for a manager: “Good health is about every decision we make every day… and for managers, it’s about the decisions we make for ourselves and for the company, as well as for the employees.” For Dan, achieving good health is a constant process. “I guess this is a life-long project. And it should be,” said Dan, “Being healthy is an attitude. With this attitude one is motivated to improve and to be better at all times.”

Body modification

Dan is humorous and easy going, yet he is also extremely rational in terms of goals that he is determined to achieve. When talking about health ideals, Dan remained somewhat negative about his own body shape. He talked about his muscle mass on several occasions. “I know I do not look exactly like today’s fittest individuals…they are slim, with very well-toned muscles. I have a different build.” He paused and flexed his biceps. “I don’t think I could win a running race with this body. But I am good at other sports such as cycling.” Although often emphasizing that his build is not suited for running, there was noticeable dissatisfaction in his tone when he talked about his “disadvantage” when running.

In fact, Dan has never stopped working on making changes to his body. Since our first meeting, I have met him on a few other occasions, sometimes at the gym which we both go to. Lately, Dan seems to have lost much of his muscle
mass and become leaner. During our meeting in the autumn of 2013, two years after our first meeting, Dan finally revealed the secret of his transformation.

You see, I don’t want to walk around looking like a body builder. There are ways to change the shape and the size of your body if you only know how. I go to the gym mainly to shape my body. I do aerobic exercises which don’t build muscle mass, but reduce it. Then, as you know, I run more often and longer … just like many others in my company.

“I don’t want to look like a body builder” is only one of the reasons that Dan has been determined to change his body image. The “many others” that Dan has often mentioned are the few Business Unit Managers in his organization, the Country Manager from Norway, and his own boss, the Nordic/Baltic Vice President from Denmark, who Dan perceived to be constantly challenging him. They have run marathons or half marathons multiple times. Dan feels the pressure from his peers at times. Although convinced that his body was not built for running, Dan still set himself the goal to make changes. He runs longer distances, he has reduced his muscle mass, the size of his suit has gone down two sizes.

In a short time, Dan becomes a runner through and through. Dan faces the “challenges” very seriously. “Well, I can’t give up. If it’s a challenge, I will just have to take it and face it.” Dan is not shy about expressing his happiness over his “new body”. He was very pleased that I noticed the changes to his shape. “This is how I often impress people nowadays. When I used to go for a swim, I was often asked whether I worked out,” Dan told me, laughing proudly. “Then I would answer, ‘yes, just a bit’.”

“Impress” and “inspire” are the two words Dan uses most when talking about the change in his body image. “I do impress people, but that’s not the whole point. I want them to be inspired by me and start to do what I do.” Dan made this statement with a very sincere attitude. He later told me that he always pitied those who could not crack the code about the benefits of an active, athletic lifestyle.

**Dan’s lifestyle approaches**

An athletic lifestyle

For Dan, being healthy is about a balanced diet and always being physically active. Dan has a diploma in Fitness and Nutrition. “I normally watch what I eat very carefully. Of course, I enjoy the occasional Thai take-away too. Then
I need to get this unhealthy food or alcohol out of my system. So I work out more and harder.”

Dan told me about his balanced diet when we met for a lunch meeting. He ordered a green salad. Chewing away, he told me about the importance of a healthy diet. To Dan, following a strict healthy diet does not only require knowledge of fitness and nutrition; it also demands a highly disciplined mind. “After a night of partying, when I have drunk some wine, I go for a longer run.”

With a demanding job like his, time appears to be the obvious obstacle for doing regular exercise. Yet Dan emphasized that motivation was the real issue. “There is always time to work out. You can always make time if you want to; and it is motivation that is lacking in most cases.”

Dan is not likely to have motivation problems. He hired a personal assistant (who also held a position in the Human Resources Department). She takes him along to work out and enrols him in different running and cycling races. They go out for a run or a cycle trip during lunch breaks or at weekends. “I try to make time for some physical exercise every day. Then I will gain two more hours’ energy afterwards.”

Dan often posts the results of races, the progress in his workouts and even training-related injuries on Facebook. Mountain biking has long been a passion for Dan. From the Facebook posts, I have learnt that Dan completed Vätternrundan (a long-distance cycling race, around 300 km) in 2013; and just recently, together with a few employees, he managed the “Bicycle-Vasa”, a 95 km cycle race between the towns of Sälen and Mora. The venue for this race is also used for one of the world’s longest cross-country skiing races: Vasaloppet (90 km). Dan holds very strong views about posts on social media, and insists that they only send positive information about the person.

I don’t think it’s wise of people to post party pictures where they are drunk. It is much better to post pictures with a healthy lifestyle. The message you send out about yourself is positive.

Transforming from a rugby player to a runner

Dan was more involved in team sports such as football and rugby between the ages of 6 and 30; he now does individual sports and martial arts. He has his own interpretation of this change.

Rugby and football taught me about collaborating as a team member. I benefit from that experience very much in both work and life.

Today, Dan is more involved in individual sports such as running, cycling and karate. “Doing individual endurance sports is like a therapeutic process. It’s a process where you discover either your strength or your weakness.” Taking up individual sports was also primarily due to the amount of time certain arrangements needed. Yet he has more profound thoughts about every sport he is doing. Dan has a green belt in karate and trains with an elite karate instructor. “This is where I learn to concentrate. In karate, one second of absent-mindedness and you will fail completely.” According to Dan, this is another process where he learns a great deal about himself.

In karate, you are often dependent on mentorship. The ranking marked by the colour of the belt indicates the authority and elitism in this sport. You show respect to those who are ranked higher, but at the same time, you challenge them. Learning and winning; exactly what we need to do in business.

“Mastering ‘choice, change and challenge’”: Dan’s view of a good leader

Dan emphasized three key words when describing a good leader; they are choice, change and challenge. For Dan, making the ‘right’ choices in life, setting goals for ‘change’ and gaining courage through challenges are the most important qualities of a leader. Furthermore, like Adam, Dan emphasizes that his role is to be the ‘good example’ who passes on the ‘right’ self-disciplinary qualities to others.

Mastering choice, change and challenge

Dan explained choice in a number of ways. First, choice implies that it is his responsibility as a leader to select the right people for the company. He stressed that he would always look for the qualities in a person which were not explicitly marked by educational certificates. Rather, the real strength of a person often shines through their daily habitual activities. He said that he would not be surprised should there be more former elite athletes taking on top management positions.

We need the qualities which elite athletes have. Not only for coping with workload and stress, but management needs the highly competitive individuals who are trained to achieve goals.
Dan seemed to firmly believe that what someone does in their spare time says more about the most important ‘core quality’ of a management candidate. Other qualities such as knowledge or work experiences are acquirable through work practices, but the instinct of wanting to win and the ability to persist and eventually achieve final objectives can only be attained through years of hard training and being committed to participating in various competitions. When Dan elaborated on why being athletic was closely associated with the desired qualities of a manager, “determination” and “self-discipline” were the two recurrent words. The ability to control and discipline one’s physical capacity leads to the ability to accomplish goals at work.

Second, choice in life is crucial. “Everyone is responsible for the consequences of their choices in life.” Making the right choices is apparently crucial. “People make choices in life every day. These choices can be as small as the food you choose to eat, the activities you do in your spare time, or the people you associate with.”

Dan believes that if he is able to make the “right choices” in his life, others will be able to do it, too. According to him, it is a personal choice whether to become fit or unfit. “You choose to sit in the sofa and eat crisps or you choose to go out and do some mountain biking…it’s as simple as that. The choices in life not only make changes to one’s life, but they also provide much information about the quality of the person.” Dan’s “sport-job-fit” theory explains this further. “For example, for a sales person, it is better if the person is involved in highly competitive sports. A team player’s qualities can, of course, be shown in team sports.”

Change through challenges is something with which Dan says he is obsessed. He re-formulated the “goal theory” in his own words: “In the past I played rugby. After that, I took up mountain biking and cycling, and then I took up karate. It’s not always important what the sport is, but rather that I set myself goals and achieve those goals persistently.” He claimed that the experience of rugby training made him a “person-oriented” leader, which is another term often stressed in Dan’s MBA leadership courses.

Team-playing is extremely important. I need to make my co-workers think that we are a team. My managers can come right into my office without making an appointment with me.

Dan uses the analogy of the relation between the captain of a rugby team and its other players to describe his relation with his co-workers.
Without people, we don’t have a business. Like on the rugby field, we need good communication with each other. I like to spend a lot of time with people, coach them, train them, and help them to develop. It’s the same thing I apply to my private life – if you don’t spend quality time with your family and friends and you don’t communicate with them, even provide them with some feedback, you will not have any friends and family left.

To be a good example to others

Not only does Dan like to face challenges and make changes in his life and in the company he leads, he also feels he is responsible for bringing positive changes to other people’s lives. He describes himself as a person who inspires and motivates others. “I won’t say I manage people, but I think I have some influence on them. If I perform well, both in life and at work, they will see and learn.”

Dan is obviously proud of the fact that the number of managers in his company who are involved in sports is increasing. He also made a remark about those who are “left behind”. “I know I have made some changes that I’m proud of, but there are still a few people on the management team who should do more exercise. I notice that they are not as energetic as the others are. Some of them are brilliant intellectually but they just don’t get it that doing sports can make your mind even sharper.” Dan gave me an example: “Lisa is great intellectually. I am only disappointed that she does not seem to be very active in her spare time…she is slightly overweight in my eyes.” Another person Dan made remark about was his CFO: “Joel is over 60 now, he has never had an active lifestyle in his whole life but now he’s starting to tell me about his training schedules. At least he’s trying to impress me with his progress.”

Being a good leader is about setting a good example for others; the term “role model” was mentioned many times during our conversations. In Dan’s upbringing, he looked up to his father and brother. He admired their performances on the rugby fields. He believes people need to look up to others in order to develop at work, too. The person Dan mentioned most was his boss, whom he described as a “monster”. “He does basically everything when it comes to sports. He has this extremely demanding job, but he still manages to find time to exercise. This is what I admire and what inspires me most. You learn from those who are better than yourself.”

Dan believes that in being a role model, he is both the drive for his own changes and the inspiration for potential changes in others. “Absolutely. I work hard, and I work out hard. Most times it’s not only for me. I always bear this sense of responsibility. Firstly it’s for the good of my company, and secondly, it’s good for my employees if they make the changes.”
Dan has proven that he was not only trying to inspire his own employees, but he also brought in some influences from outside his company. He has become a guest lecturer at a business school, giving lectures about leadership and management on an MBA programme. Dan said he was really pleased when students expressed their appreciation and even admiration to him. “I’m not only there to talk about my company and my leadership, but I also try to ‘attract’ and identify talents. I want people to come to work in my company because of me.”

Dan described his own leadership practices as composed of fifty per cent operational work and fifty per cent transformational work.

You can say that I used to take exercise to cope with the workload, but now I am doing it more to inspire others. This is the transformation that I have gone through.

In general, Dan is fond of the transformational part of his job. “I don’t like to be buried in operational work. I do it when I have to. Now that we have an organization that functions well, I leave it to my division managers to run the company. I focus more on setting up the visions and strategies. This is called leading.” Ideal leadership, in Dan’s words, means reducing the operational work to zero but working on inspiring and motivating people and making changes in the culture of an organization. “To put it briefly, I would like to steer the direction of the voyage.”

Notes

In our last meeting in autumn 2013, I asked Dan about the goals he had set for changes and challenges for the near future. He gave me a long list. Amongst a lot of things Dan would like to achieve, were accomplishing at least a half Vasaloppet, participating in the Tough Viking Race, doing the cycling Vasa again, running the half marathon in Stockholm, and going to the gym at least three times a week in a continuing effort to shape his body. Today, Dan and his family live back in Ireland. From Facebook posts, I read about his life back in his home country. He rides mountain bikes with friends and colleagues. He does not run as much as he did in Sweden when he was under pressure from his Swedish peers. He has regained his large muscle mass, but he looks happy and healthy.
Anna

The first meeting

Before meeting Anna, we contacted each other via email. She showed obvious enthusiasm about meeting me. We set up our first meeting as a working lunch at her office.

I arrived early for our meeting. The Nordic Regional office of Anna’s company has a large reception area and there are a few meeting rooms which are named after different cities such as Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Beijing. I waited for Anna for a few minutes before she came out to meet me.

Anna is in her forties. She is tall, slender and elegant, with her long, blond hair falling to her shoulders. She is dressed in black. She later told me that this outfit of a black v-neck sweater, a pair of long black trousers and a pair of black high-heel boots is her favourite “power dress”.

Anna walked towards me and I noticed the glimpse of slight surprise in her eyes, yet she quickly resumed her normal facial expression. We shook hands. Anna is tall. In her heels, she is almost 1.80 m. I am 1.60 m and was in my flat ballerinas. Standing in front of Anna, shaking her hand while sensing her suspicions regarding my identity, I almost felt intimidated. She later told me that she pictured me as Swedish or American in our email communications, but she did not expect me to be Asian. After interviewing many top managers in Stockholm, I have begun to get used to this reaction. Nevertheless, I appreciate Anna for being honest about it.

We went straight to one of the meeting rooms. This was the biggest room with an oval shaped boardroom table in the middle. “We are going to have a management team meeting later in this room,” Anna said as an explanation as to why she had chosen the largest meeting room for our one-on-one meeting. She became very relaxed sitting down at the end of the oval table closest to the whiteboard. That is probably where she sits for all her meetings; a spot where she can easily overlook the whole room and make the conclusive remarks. I sat down on the opposite side of the table. The distance between us was perfectly appropriate for a first meeting; not too intimate, yet not too far
from each other. The receptionist came in with our lunches, two salad lunch boxes. “I ordered a salad for you, I hope it is fine,” Anna said. “This is just perfect, thank you,” I responded.

The slightly awkward moment between Anna and I soon dissolved when we began our conversation. Before I started to ask any questions, Anna said she was curious about me. I therefore started to give her a brief introduction about myself. After learning that I am from China, have lived in Sweden for thirteen years and am the mother of a fifteen-year-old son, Anna became relaxed and chatty.

Anna’s story

Childhood and upbringing

Anna told me she grew up as an athlete and fitness enthusiast. “My parents influenced me a lot when I was a little girl. I was sent to different sports activities after school all the time, like swimming, football, dancing etc.” As a child, Anna learnt that sports were a necessary part of life. “I was happy doing sports, and especially winning the competitions. I have never imagined a life without doing sports. And I am happy about the competitive instincts within me.”

Growing up in Copenhagen city, Anna used her bicycle as her commuting vehicle. She believes this has also contributed to her active lifestyle. “I was on my bike all day long when I was young. Now I love spinning. It does not demand good weather, and I don’t need to go out to do it.” Anna later went to college and chose Computer Science as her major. “I have always been a technology freak. I believe technology changes everything.”

Along with her studies in Computer Science, Anna also chose economics and management courses at business school. While studying at college, she had already worked as an aerobics and spinning instructor in the gym for years. She also occasionally coached the Danish men’s national spinning team.

One of her personal highlights is that she was a Danish gold medallist in aerobics in 1996. After receiving her Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science and working as an instructor in the gym for a while, Anna went back to school. She accomplished her MBA degree at Copenhagen Business School. “I love technology, but I also realized that my work passion lay in managing people and organizations.”
Anna believes the athletic lifestyle that she built in her childhood makes her a focused person. When she decides to do something, she works hard on it and achieves her goals. She firmly believes it is this quality that has brought her where she is today in terms of career development. Anna’s dreams of pursuing a career came true quickly. After receiving her MBA, she worked as a management consultant, then as the Head of IT Operations and later as the Director of Regional Office in different companies within the computer software industry.

Anna always sets her family in motion, too. A newspaper article from an online business daily described Anna’s private life thus: “she influences the whole family with her great passion for sports”. Anna takes the whole family cycling, swimming, diving and skiing. “This has been the way we communicate with each other; it still is today, between me and my children.”

“Always in motion” can also depict Anna’s ambition in her career. After working as a management consultant for a large American software company, Anna felt it was her time to change to bigger jobs and to take on greater organizational responsibilities. She took up her first position as Division Director in a relatively small company. Anna only stayed in that position for two years as she saw a chance to become the CEO in a start-up company. Anna then looked for international exposure. In 2009, she gained her current position as the Director of the Nordic Region of this American software company and she decided to locate her family and this position in Stockholm.

After our first interview, I was invited to Anna’s three-day management meeting with the whole of the Nordic Region management team. She wore her signature long dark trousers and high heels. She opened the meeting with a briefing. Her speech was short and the tone of her voice was decisive, and she kept that tone throughout the entire meeting. After the briefing, Anna encouraged her team to speak and occasionally made some conclusive remarks. Today, Anna still works as the Nordic Regional Director. Yet the organization has expanded through several acquisitions so Anna is still “always in motion”; and she is facing the greater challenges that she wished for.

**Anna’s current work situations**

When Anna describes her current work situation, she often talks about the high level of competition that remains in the IT industry. She feels that it is a great challenge for a female leader to be in this industry, because she constantly needs to try to “impress the ‘flock’ of male peers”. Another challenge she
faces is the absence of a ‘recreational fund’ from the company’s American headquarters. She feels that this has made her company less attractive than others in the same industry.

“Being a female leader” and trying to impress the “flock of men”

The company Anna works for today is one of the leading actors in global virtualization and cloud infrastructure. The company also provides services and solutions which enable businesses in the Cloud Era. The highly knowledge-intensive and innovation-oriented company has been growing rapidly since it was founded back in 1999. Today, the company has more than 500,000 customers and 55,000 partners world-wide and is headquartered in Silicon Valley with offices around the world. Anna leads the Nordic Regional organization, which covers country offices in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

There are around 200 employees in the Nordic Region. “My responsibility here in the Nordic Region is to support the company’s fast-growing strategy through partnership expansion and taking care of marketing and sales in the Nordic countries.” During our meeting, Anna expressed her ambition in seeking the next step: “I enjoy my work here, but I am also open to moving on, to another country or a bigger job.”

Influencing others in ‘self-funded’ health promotion initiatives

Compared with other sporty top managers in this study, Anna faces greater challenges in terms of initiating workplace health promotion programmes. “Because of the fact that my company does not offer health and recreation compensations in monetary form, I have to compete with other employers for other benefits. Even though the amount of money for health and recreation is not much, it is a salient symbolic gesture of care from the employer to employees.” The lack of this positive ‘symbolic gesture’ was described by Anna as “probably the dark side of business the ‘American way’”. Nonetheless, Anna compensates this “defect” with greater efforts to promote a healthy lifestyle in the Nordic Region to the greatest extent within her power.

Whenever we go away for a conference, the social activities are always related to sports. I also organize some small competitions with little prizes involved. We just had our Nordic autumn conference; we had a lot of fun doing outdoor activities. We took a walk in the woods, played football, and went canoeing.

In a situation where it is difficult to initiate collective health promotion activities, the leader’s personal role is particularly crucial, according to Anna.
She encourages her employees and colleagues to participate in sports activities during their spare time.

*While I am too busy to exercise frequently enough to be their role model, I do what I can to inspire them. I cycle to work. I see more and more bikes now parked outside the office, which I am really happy about. I know that I have managed to influence some of them.*

I paid particular attention to the small bike stand outside the entrance of the company where I saw many bikes parked. I believe Anna was proud for a reason. Caring about people’s well-being can take many forms. Anna chooses to do it in smaller settings. For example, she has created a daily healthy ritual in the office, the fruit break. Every day at 2pm the receptionist prepares a huge fruit salad for the coffee break. “This is to make people more aware of a healthy diet. But we also prepare sweets for those who crave for sugar.” Although sweet buns are also offered, most of the people choose the fruit over the “sugar bombs”. “I like to make changes through doing small things like these. Maybe it is because I am a woman. A male manager would never come up with an idea like this,” Anna concluded.

Although the company does not offer subsidies for gym membership there is a Wellness Department at corporate level which organizes “health challenges” involving incentives. Anna showed me the flyer for the “Maintain Don’t Gain” challenge. It was a weight-loss competition, which was apparently inspired by the TV programme The Biggest Loser. The programme specifies the routines for weight loss through physical exercise, diet and water consumption. The contestants should aim to collect the 12 points at the end of the challenge. In Anna’s opinion, it is a relief that the company addressed health issues at corporate level. It is important for her to feel certain about the congruency between her own and the corporate values.

**Anna’s health ideals**

Anna sighed when I asked her the question about her health ideals. “I wish that I could show you that my own health practice is the ideal one. But I can’t. I don’t have much time now to be in the ideal state.” Anna says she hardly ever feels that she has reached her ideal state of health.

Maintaining an active life has been a vision for Anna. When she entered her career in top management, her constant ambition to pursue an ascending career
path resembled the vision of an active lifestyle. Although much time goes to her work, Anna keeps strictly to her exercise routines. She believes that the effects of staying active both at work and in sports are mutually beneficial.

*It is natural for me to go for a run or to a spinning class whenever I have time. When I can’t do either of them, I watch what I eat more closely. I want to keep an energetic appearance and always show up looking fit.*

Anna likes to use examples to illustrate her health ideals. She told me about her boss, the Senior Vice-President who recruited her. Anna’s boss was a competitive swimmer for a few years. According to Anna, with this history, her boss is able to see the most needed quality in a potential candidate for recruitment. Anna told me that on one occasion she and her boss met a few candidates for a Sales Manager position; the candidates on the short list were equally qualified in terms of work experience and educational background.

*In the end, we chose the one who used to be a competitive swimmer. My boss understood how much strength and endurance one had to have in order to survive the boredom, loneliness and competitive environment in a sport like swimming.*

With this example, Anna tried to explain to me that the ideal state of health was when one could merge the physical endurance with the mental strength and present both at work. Anna argued that health is the ability that people are born with, or acquire later in life through exercise in the early ages.

*In a highly competitive society, the survivors will be those who are ready to win and those who are patient enough to overcome difficulties, too. And this ability is developed through years of hard work in sports.*

When we talked about the health ideal, Anna began to talk about the kind of demands her industry made on a qualified employee. “Being perfect” and a “super woman” were the phrases repeated by Anna. “In our industry, we need to constantly look for ‘super humans’ and we also need to be better at all times so that we can remain competitive or we will fail.” The ‘super human’ keeps their body in good shape, has a high level of physical capacity, and lives a disciplined life.
Anna’s lifestyle approaches

Sporting plays a crucial role in Anna’s life. “After a workout, I often get a craving for healthy food. And creative ideas will evolve.” Anna claimed that she had more time than ever to work out after her divorce. “Now I have lots of time to go cycling and running. I think I am in the best shape ever.” What Anna meant was the comparison between before the divorce and after it. After the divorce, she had her children over every two weeks; this allowed her more time to work out on her own.

Even when I am with my children, we spend time together doing sports. I choose what they like to do and join them. For example, we often go for a swim or play badminton together.

Lifestyles have their visible aspect, according to Anna. For Anna, apart from physical appearance, controlling one’s lifestyle is an important means of demonstrating professional competence and gaining recognition.

Lifestyle is visible. What you eat and do turns into how you look and even who you are; whether you are able to have a good night’s sleep will show in your performance at work so you cannot escape from the consequences if you are careless about your lifestyle.

Anna always chooses a salad for lunch. “To keep fit, I guess this has become part of me and part of my job,” she said, with a partly joking and partly serious attitude. Anna holds a very unique view about spinning, which is one of her favourite sports. She loves the pain it leaves her.

Sometimes after an intensive spinning session my thighs will hurt for days, but that’s just part of the great feeling that my body is coping with more and more intense exercise. I actually like the pain it leaves me with. It reminds me of the wonderful feeling after my exercise! Isn’t it the same feeling when we are facing difficulties and finally overcome them? I think the pain and joy from exercising resembles the feeling when one overcomes problems in life (Johansson et al., 2017: 12).

Anna tries to be in motion at all times. “When I am in Stockholm I often take the bike to work. This is how I get some exercise every day. I use the stairs instead of lifts, and try to park the car further away if I have to drive.”

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9 This quote has been used in page 12 in Johansson et al., 2017.
Our conversations around Anna’s lifestyle were often centred on her travels and how she spent her limited spare time in the hotel gyms. “When I book a hotel, the first thing I need to know is whether there is a gym with good spinning bikes in it. I often make good use of it”, Anna said this with a firm tone in her voice.

In order to cope with her stressful work schedule, Anna takes serious measures to keep a good sleeping routine. “I travel a lot on business. Good sleep is the most important source of energy. I try many methods like meditation, doing moderate workouts before bedtime, just for a good night's sleep.” Diet is another aspect to which Anna pays attention. She is careful with the quality of the food she eats but she does not follow restricted diets such as GI or Atkins. Although not particularly meticulous in the type of food she eats, Anna is aware of the simple balance between energy intake and output.

I indulge in food when I have done a workout. It is more likely that you fill up on unhealthy food in my type of job. You are often invited to dinners or spend time eating and drinking with customers. I choose to exercise more to burn the extra calories.

“Becoming a ‘super woman’”: Anna’s view of a good leader

The ‘super human’ health ideal also spilled over to Anna’s interpretation of her view of a good leader. “The industry needs creative ‘super humans’ and my management needs more ‘super women’,,” Anna said. Retaining a ‘super woman’ image and making people feel safe about her decisions were the first things Anna mentioned when describing a fictional image of a good leader.

While Anna was ascending her career path, her marriage fell apart. She used to be proud of her family and the collaborative model she had at home. Anna and her husband went through their divorce in 2011. Now they share the custody of their two children who were 10 and 12 at the time the couple divorced. “People used to think my life was perfect: I was this woman with a great looking family and a successful career,” Anna said. “I was upset. I told people about my experiences, but I do not think people reacted negatively when I showed them my vulnerability. I think now they like me more, because I am this ‘super woman’ with human feelings,” Anna said, giving me a wry smile.

Becoming a ‘healthy’ role model

Anna believes that demonstrating a healthy lifestyle, following a regular exercise routine and having a toned body makes people around her feel safe.
“By ‘safe’ I mean that people know that they are working with a ‘super woman’ and that she keeps everything under control.”

If we think back in time about human history, the tribal leaders were often big and strong. That was the first thing that impressed their followers, and then came the capacity to lead, intellectual competence etc. Today I believe that if you are well-educated and you are able to demonstrate your extraordinary work competence in terms of leading, being healthy and keeping a fit physique it can add that little extra strength.

The ‘super woman’ image Anna emphasizes is primarily about a powerful appearance.

I try to appear to be in good shape, which indicates that I am in control of myself. It also says a lot about your ability to keep things under control in work situations. Meanwhile, with a healthy image, I am able to show people the importance of making right decisions. What you choose to eat, what you choose to do makes visible changes in your appearance.

This ‘super woman’ image also has much to do with the concept of being a role model according to Anna. “The leader is the role model. There is no doubt about it. I cannot imagine myself being in this position and projecting an image as extremely overweight,” Anna said.

On the above point, Anna stresses that it is equally important to maintain a fit image as to have sufficient competence, knowledge and experience.

Nowadays a leader is not only judged by his or her inner qualities, but is also evaluated on the physical appearance. Actually, I think a manager is judged primarily on their appearance nowadays.

**Recruiting competitive ‘super humans’**

‘Super leaders’ can never succeed without ‘super employees’. The ability to recruit ‘super humans’ is seen as another talent that a good leader has to possess. Anna proudly told me her understanding about the need of ‘super human’ in the IT industry and in her company. Although she used her fingers to imitate quotations marks when she mentioned “super human”, her tone and attitude kept very serious.

I or we try to select the ‘super human’ who is good at every aspect in life. One needs to be outstanding at work, great at home, and extremely energetic and competitive in terms of physical exercise. And these qualities of an individual
can very much be reflected in their activities in their spare time. The ‘super humans’ keep their bodies in shape, which is also a strong indicator that they live a healthy life. These individuals are also more enduring and energetic.\textsuperscript{10} (Johansson et al., 2017: 13-14).

Anna is aware of the role and position of women in a male-dominated industry. One of Anna’s leadership pledges was to bring more women into the top positions in the industry. “It is unfortunate that there are so few women in the industry. I am doing my best to make some changes.” Anna has done much to fulfil this pledge. In her Nordic regional management team there are four women and four men. “I was looking for women when I created my team,” Anna stressed.

“If two candidates were equal in terms of experience and competence, I would choose the woman. That was never a secret.” The four women are the country managers of Sweden and Norway, the Marketing Communication Director of the Nordic Region and Anna herself. Anna handpicked all three women. “If you look into their CVs, you will find parts of me in them. They do many sports in their spare time, too. I see them as ‘super women’.”

Anna believes her male associates are more impressed by her physical strength than her Master’s Degree in engineering or MBA certificate. Anna is proud of the ‘super women’ she has selected. With her implicit faith in the concept of the ‘super human’, Anna says she also helps the country managers to select the most dedicated sportsmen and sportswomen for their sales force.

The compromises of a ‘super woman’

Anna would like to be recognized as a good mother while proving herself as a responsible top manager. Since her divorce, Anna has to leave her children with the babysitter when she travels for business. She feels very guilty about this.

\textit{I really hope my male colleagues will be more considerate when they book a meeting outside Stockholm in my diary. I hope they do not take all my vacant time slots. I need to spend some time with my children when they are not with their father.}

In the meantime, Anna seems to accept the fact that her responsibilities as a leader require her to compromise her private life. “Well, after all, I need to cope with what it takes for a job like this. It is my own choice to be a ‘super woman’ at work, isn’t it?”

\textsuperscript{10} This quote has been used in Johansson et al., 2017, p. 13-14.
Although it is difficult to cope with her different roles in life, Anna still acknowledges the advantages of being a woman in a male-dominated industry.

*I often get the first meetings with customers or when being interviewed for a job because people are curious to see the ‘giraffe’. But after the first meeting, I have to impress the client or my potential employer with solid performances.*

Anna suggests that women ought to mobilize the advantage of “getting the first meetings”. “This is the time when you make the best impressions, but somehow we have to make that effect from the first impression become a long-lived one.” As a woman and in a top position, Anna wants to appear particularly strong. “We are otherwise often judged as being weak, whereas the guys may often get away with the excuse that they’re having a bad day.”

“To cope with” and “to adapt” are two phrases Anna uses most frequently in her talks about leadership, yet at the same time, she showed great determination and strength. “It is indeed a man’s world in the IT industry. I need to impress my male colleagues in order to be a powerful pack leader.”

**The ‘power dress’ of a ‘super woman’**

The super human needs to dress appropriately at work, too. Anna holds clear preferences and dislikes in this regard. “I like to dress up so that my body is complimented but at the same time it is not too sexy. I don’t want to send the wrong signals, you see.” To explain that, Anna stood up and showed me how she had dressed that particular day. “I like slim-fit v-neck sweaters. They are gender neutral and look business casual. But I need to make sure the opening is not too deep so the view from above will not be too revealing.” Anna sat down again to show me how someone could look down into her V-neck when standing behind her chair. “So I always put on another layer of tight top under my sweater just to be on the safe side.” Anna explained that she needed to pay extra attention to dressing appropriately because of her position in a male-dominated industry. “I sometimes have to de-womanize myself in order for my male colleagues to take me seriously.” To explain this, Anna told me about an occasion when she had been too “feminine” in a semi-work setting.

*I was having dinner with my boss, who was visiting Stockholm. I chose an outdoor place for dinner so that we could enjoy the Swedish summer evening. I was dressed in my usual summer evening outfit, which is very different from my ordinary office outfit. I was tanned, I was wearing makeup which I normally do not do in the office, and I was wearing heels... Then my boss made the following comment: ‘Anna, thank God you don’t dress up like this in the office every day, otherwise no-one would be able to concentrate on their work anymore...’ This*
was a strong reminder that I and other women need to appear professional in work settings. Our male colleagues might not take us seriously if we are too much of a woman. They would be thinking of you in a different way, you would also lose the respect you hope to get.

Looking fit and toned but still maintaining a professional look is important for Anna. A pair of trousers and high heels is Anna’s standard uniform. She also likes to wear her long blond hair in a ponytail.

As you can see, I am more often in trousers. If I do wear a skirt, I make sure it is the correct length (just above or on the knee) or I will choose to wear opaque tights under. I also like to wear heels although I am tall. This type of outfit makes me feel powerful but still feminine.

Anna lifted her feet to show me her heels. They are 10cm high. I understood what she meant by power when recalling standing in front of her and feeling intimidated when we first met. According to Anna, being physically fit, competitive, and able to show it in a discreet manner in the workplace is a much more effective way to gain respect. Anna was very straightforward about what is an inappropriate look in the office, too.

The dress code at work applies to men, too. Men who wear tight shirts and flex pumped-up muscles do not make a very professional impression either. I once had to tell my receptionist to wear long sleeves to cover up the tattoos on her arms. I do not want people to get the wrong impression of her.

Notes

I last saw Anna in an Atea Bootcam video clip. Atea is a platform forum for IT managers, CTOs and other decision makers within the IT industry. Anna gave a speech about organizational culture, technology and the human brain. In that speech, she suggested that organizations ought to establish a particular culture to stimulate both hemispheres of their employees’ brains with technology. To conclude that speech, she cracked a joke, mimicking a blond beauty complaining about her own brain capacity. “The test says that in my left brain, nothing is right; and in my right brain, nothing is left.” The audience laughed in response. It seems that Anna still constantly makes efforts to become a ‘super woman’ in the highly competitive IT industry. She tries to prove to others that she is a different kind of woman, a tougher, stronger and wiser ‘super woman’ who truly fits the position as a leader.
Mary

The first meeting

When I first met Mary she was between jobs. I read her blogs, where she wrote about her daily training with a ski instructor. After just one phone call, Mary and I decided to meet over lunch. She chose the restaurant. Our first meeting took place in one of the most popular lunch restaurants close to Mary’s home in the city. She was seven minutes late. When she walked into the restaurant, she did not recognize me right away. I approached her and introduced myself. She looked surprised, but alleviated that surprise later by telling me “I am also half-Asian”. Without apologizing for being late, Mary told me that she had come straight from the gym. Her outfit also revealed that fact. She wore a loose-fitting woollen top and a pair of soft training trousers. Her hair was still wet under a red beanie. She was carrying a big training bag and wearing a pair of worn-out trainers.

We sat down at a corner table beside the window. When we started to talk, I felt Mary’s remarkable skill in putting people at ease right away. As I took out my small recorder, she did not seem to be bothered at all. Without being asked, she started to introduce herself to me, telling me about her upbringing, education and previous jobs. She listened to what I had to say about my research and showed great interest in it, and occasionally cut in to offer some input and reflections. Mary spoke in a clear and confident manner although without putting too much pressure on me in the conversation. She talked at length about herself but never neglected what I was saying. At times, she even pulled out a piece of paper to take notes and said, “I have to write this down. It will be an interesting idea for my next book.” She later told me that she was thinking of writing a book about leadership.

Mary ordered beef tartar for lunch and explained that she was on a strict diet because of her training. She took a picture of the plate when the food arrived. “I am going to post this on my blog,” she laughed. “I show people what I eat these days on Facebook and my blog.” It was a long lunch meeting, and we talked and shared many interesting thoughts about health, life and leadership. While I was observing her, Mary observed me, too. She took a picture of me with her iPhone. My picture was posted on her blog later that day with the
description saying: “Janet turned out to be a very beautiful, smart and fun person…”

Mary’s story

Childhood and upbringing

Mary was born into an intercultural family in 1968. Her father is from south Asia and her mother is Swedish. She grew up in a small town on the west coast of Sweden. During her school years, she was a member of the Young Eagles. This is an aviation club designed to give children between the ages of 8 to 17 an opportunity to experience flight in a general aviation airplane while educating them about aviation. Mary said she received an introductive education in aviation in this club, and she believes her risk-taking courage came partially from her early experiences in this aviation education. According to Mary, she has always been an extrovert person ever since she was a young child. “I won’t say I was like a boy. But I was different from other girls; I was more daring. I like to try and do a lot of things that I haven’t done before.”

Mary later moved to Stockholm for her college education. Her major at university was Journalism Studies, which might have paved the way for her later active participation in work in the social media. “I have always loved journalism. I like to express my opinions and convince people to be on my side. I thought journalism was a great tool in this sense. I love debating with people, convincing and eventually persuading them.”

Mary became a single mother when she was in her early twenties. She later married a scholar with whom she shares the custody of their two children. Mary sees her experiences as a single mum, and now divorcee, as important life experiences.

I have always been the odd one out. Raising a child (daughter) alone, later working with mainly older men in top positions. I am younger, foreign, and a single mum. These atypical characteristics are part of me; later they have become recognized and even appreciated by others.

Apart from her job as the CEO of a market research company, Mary is also known as a columnist in the Swedish daily press and a controversial panellist in a TV programme. She likes to bring up heated societal issues such as scandals around individual politicians, government policies etc. Between
2007 and 2011, Mary founded a marketing research firm, where she also worked as the CEO. The firm is part of a group of leading communication agencies in Europe, which consists of more than 100 specialists in all aspects of marketing, corporate communications, public affairs, digital media, business intelligence, planning and strategic counselling. The average age of the co-workers in Mary’s firm was approximately 30 and most of the employees were young market analyst graduates from business schools. “I was almost the oldest in the group. But I enjoy working with young people in many ways, although at times I need to be very firm in terms of how I want things to be done.” As CEO, Mary led several award-winning communications campaigns.

Mary is also an author. Her first book was published in 2011. In her works, she argues that social status is the source of happiness. That is, one needs to retain a high status to be happy; and the status also makes one feel happier. This argument, about the prevailing high social status, is closely associated with Mary’s conservative political view.

In 2011, just before our meeting, Mary decided to take up the offer to become the Director General of one of the largest organizations in the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. During the time between two jobs, Mary started to be more actively engaged in sports. In her own words, she was free at the time so she had to set new goals in her life to accomplish something she did not do much before. She started swimming, cycling and cross-country skiing. Despite the fact that she had never stood on skis before, Mary enrolled herself for the Ladies’ Vasaloppet, a 30km cross-country ski race.

**Mary’s work situation**

After May 2012, Mary started her new post as the Director General of a national food association. The organization functions as an intermediary between the food industry/production and food distributors. The organization is one of the biggest in Sweden in terms of production value and number of employees.

Mary’s tasks involve promoting Swedish food brands and products on an international scale. She participates in the public debate on food, and meets representatives from National Food Association, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs regularly. At least once a week Mary is out inspecting the food production.

As a journalist and TV panellist, Mary is known for being provocative as she often brings controversies out into the forefront of public debate. In her new
workplace, which she describes as a very conservative organization, she caused a few outcries from farmers and store owners when she fearlessly stated the weakness of Swedish food and agricultural industries. After a few incidents like this, Mary came to realize that she had to change her way of working. “I needed to learn to adapt to this new environment. Now I feel that I am more settled. I will try to keep my mouth shut.”

Although it took her some time to settle into the new organization, she enjoys her current job. Compared to her previous job, it is a major change which also projects many challenges. This is exactly what Mary enjoys, changes and challenges. “As far as I’m concerned, life would have been too boring without new changes and challenges. It is the challenges that excite me and motivate me to move forward.”

Being the major decision-maker in one of the largest organizations in Sweden, Mary is often in the public eye. She often appears at press conferences, receiving high level international customers. She travels frequently, too, both domestically and internationally. I can follow her travel schedule on her blog and Facebook posts. She travels to countries like Australia, the United States and China. “But I try to travel less when I have the children with me,” Mary stressed.

For the most part, Mary enjoys this lifestyle. Travelling abroad, constant media exposure, receiving a lot of public attention, all these are indications of high social status for Mary. Her high profile job has provided her with the high status and happiness she describes in her book.

*I like my job. I feel that I am privileged. I enjoy a lot of freedom in this position. Although this is still a male-dominated, traditional industry, I have received much support from people around me. I spend a lot of time on my athletic engagement, but my colleagues are aware that this means a lot to the agency.*

Mary enjoys her inner city life in Stockholm. The city is full of the vibe that she needs; and her friends are close to her in the city. Pictures of herself, her meals, her children, her apartment, her friends, and of her attending parties and participating in sports have all been published on her blog, in her newspaper column and on Facebook. Mary often emphasized the importance of her children.

*I am lucky that I am a mother of three children. My oldest is already a grown-up. I have everything a woman needs to have in life. I am privileged.*
Feeling privileged, Mary keeps seeking new elements in life that may function as the source of happiness and sense of status. She began to follow the step of many male peers in doing sports activities and even enrolled in several major races. For Mary, this new trend of a ‘healthy lifestyle’ is another way she with which she expresses her unique position as a leader, and as a socially privileged person.

**Making changes in an “old-fashioned” organization**

Although her current workplace is more conservative than her previous workplace in terms of the organizational culture and has a relatively heavier bureaucratic style, Mary believes that she has brought a breath of fresh air. “People are generally older here, and to my surprise, they do not take much exercise. They are also more used to male leadership,” Mary explained, “but you see, I am going to change all that.”

Being a woman, younger than most of the other male top managers in the industry and with almost every aspect of her life actively exposed in the media, Mary is obviously determined to create a unique image as a leader. “I have also started to hire younger associates,” Mary said. “Some of them exercise with me. We get along well with each other. I need to change the image of this organization.”

At first, Mary hoped to bring about some drastic changes in the organization. However, the situations are more entrenched than she thought. “I have to adjust to my environment.” The members of the board are mainly men in their sixties. Mary therefore hopes to make the changes gradually. She concentrates on her own lifestyle practices, and she tries to include people she believes share similar values. Mary believes that she will be able to change the culture of the company without taking drastic managerial measures, but by being a role model and influence the people in the organization.

_Only people can change the culture of the organization. I need to bring more new blood into this organization. My strategy is to make changes in the organizational culture through gradually changing its members._

**Mary’s health ideals**

Being healthy is a process of continuously learning useful knowledge, according to Mary.

_There is always something to learn. For example, when I was in training for the skiing race, I also worked in the shop at the ski centre. Not only have I learnt_
to ski, but also I have gotten to understand the most central techniques, such as how to wax the skis so they glide the fastest and so on.

Mary believes in the need to learn to live and to strive for a healthy and happy life. Mary uses the example that she is learning cross-country skiing to prepare for the 30km race to illustrate how one needs to face challenges in life. “I need to focus very hard to work on this. Overcoming any challenge in life brings a step forwards. This is how you strive for a good life.”

The ideal of good health is not only about diet, physical exercise and/or quality of sleep. For Mary, the health ideal is also about challenging the status quo and making changes in people’s lives. A good life is a healthy life. And the key to a healthy life includes the notion of a high social status. Mary noticed that there is a new trend in society where competitive sports make up the new form of status.

Since she stepped into her new job, Mary has started to link her lifestyle routines - including diet, exercise activities, even her recent high-profile enrolment in the Iron Man Race - with her new leading role at work. Eating healthily and choosing a balanced diet has become more important for Mary than ever. For Mary, the societal influences of good life and good health go in a top-down cascade pattern. Mary looks up to societal icons such as the Prime Minister, and she believes she can also be one of these influencing figures in society and make an impact on the lives of others.

Yet this high status brings a heavy social responsibility, too. Mary believes that people who enjoy privileges ought to think about being good examples for others, and influence others in a positive way both in life and work.

Now especially since I am working in the food industry, I pay more attention to what I eat. What we do is to influence people how to eat and live healthily. Everything I do has a deeper meaning now. I feel I am doing it not only for myself but for many others, like a role model.

Mary’s lifestyle approaches

A high-profile public figure

As much as Mary likes to post pictures of her children on her blog and in her newspaper column, she avoids mentioning her children and she seldom talks about her hobby, interior design, in her formal business talks. “When I am in working mode, then I am very focused. I do not normally make small talk with
my co-workers in a formal meeting. They don’t need to know about my children or about my hobby.”

Mary frequently talks about her divorce in an almost positive manner. “Now at least I have time to train for the competitions. I would never have had time to do it if I were still married,” she said.

*It is interesting that all the successful women that I know of are divorced. It must be because we finally have time to pay full attention to what we want to do.*

Mary sees that being married, having children and still having a prominent position at work is the most impactful challenge for women. Men in executive positions, on the contrary, are often free from this generalization. “At home, they have wives to deal with the ‘boring’ domestic chores. At work, there is a secretary or assistant who helps them find spare time for doing other ‘important’ things,” said Mary, this time being obviously rather cynical.

**Joining the men’s club**

Mary claims that she seldom talks about her private life at work, but with one exception: she likes to talk about her sporting activities.

*It is an old-fashioned workplace; you often see overweight men or women in the office. They do not have the habit of exercising like younger people. I talk about my exercise routines; I hope to make a change, gradually.*

Mary’s athletic lifestyle is something new. She began to exercise regularly in different sports with professional instructors in 2011. The reason was that she noticed the trend of an athletic lifestyle among many top managers, especially amongst men in executive positions. Mary captured this signal of status. She wants to be part of the “sports movement”. “It’s fun to be one of the few women in leadership positions who does what the guys normally do.”

Mary has joined a few sports clubs that used to be exclusively for male executives. “These sports clubs do not have an explicit rule to exclude women, only that you need to be in a high enough position to be considered as a candidate. There have been few women who qualified so far.” Being a member of a “men’s club” is important to Mary in many ways.

*I like to prove to people that I can be as good as those men or even better. It is frustrating that there are few women that can compete with men but it makes
me feel extra excited that I can be the one to challenge this male dominance both in executive positions and in elite sporting competitions.

When talking about her engagements in sports endeavours, Mary often mentions her childhood experiences as a member of the Young Eagle as the foundation for her persistence in athletic pursuits. “I had never stood on a pair of cross-country skis before, but now I am training for the 30km race. I only need to focus and be focused, which I have learned from the time I was a fearless child.”

**Diet and exercise**

At our first meeting, Mary explained that she was on a strict diet because she was in training for the Ladies’ *Vasaloppet* skiing race. So she was staying away from alcohol and food high in carbohydrates. Mary’s strict diet remains long-lasting. Since we met for lunch a few times I was able to observe that she has consistently maintained control over her diet. Beef tartar, sashimi or a shrimp salad was what Mary ordered for lunch. On her blog, she often shows pictures of her meals. Salad, fish and grains are the most common components of these meals. Mary also mentioned the challenge of trying to be healthy at all times. “I have to cook something fun, tasty and healthy. It has to be simple and fast, too … plus I really like to test new things, so my kitchen is a lab.”

Since we met for our first interview three years ago, Mary has also maintained a very active training schedule. She has been cross-country skiing, swimming and running with professional instructors. Mary’s philosophy is that once you choose to do something, you need to be committed. Since Mary became committed to the Iron Man Race, she often travels abroad to train with professional instructors or fitness groups. For example, she trained for long-distance swimming and cycling in March in 2013. In April, she spent two weeks in Mallorca for extreme triathlon training again.

In 2013, Mary trained cross-country skiing with the CCC1000 Ski Club, an elite skiing club that provides coaching exclusively for a group of male corporate executives. These executives pay 20,000 SEK each to receive professional cross-country coaching to prepare for the *Vasaloppet*. Mary managed to join the CC1000 as one of the few female members training with other male peers. Mary told me proudly that she began to train with “the top guys”, and later, that she would like to “beat them”. Mary also attended swimming training sessions in a sports association which is a group of
For a long time, Mary’s life has been taken up with training and races, as well as being on constant diet. Although she occasionally posts vacation pictures with her children, knowing her as a winning-oriented person, I could imagine that Mary was giving everything for success. Once she is committed to a goal, her energies and efforts all go to achieve that goal.

**Lifestyle and societal status**

Mary holds conservative political views and she believes that the driving force for individual happiness and the well-being of a society come from the personal drive of maintaining a high social status. For Mary, high status is inseparable from a healthy lifestyle. The circular relation between happiness and high status, according to Mary, ought to generate positive behaviours and social outcomes. On a larger scale, athleticism and health aspects become a new element to add to the ‘goodness’ of a society and happiness of one’s life. On a personal level, Mary thinks living a healthy life and being active in sports is the source of constant challenges in her life, which she enjoys very much.

Mary likes to keep her high profile in public. This public exposure is part of the status she gains. Although extremely occupied with her job, Mary still keeps writing her newspaper column and blogs, as well as frequently posting both work-related and private events on Facebook.

Mary is developing her devotion to athletic endeavours both to improve her physical mastery and to enhance her status amongst the “sporty executives”. In the late summer of 2012, just a few months after Mary took up her new position, she decided to take part in the Iron Man Race in southern Sweden. Mary has been very enthusiastic about being the first female CEO to take on the Iron Man Race ever since, especially about the public exposure of this whole process; so she started to think about the impact of it even before starting the training.

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11 Michael Rosen is Sweden’s national coach in Open Water and has trained adult swimmers and triathletes since 2002.
This whole idea came from the event in which this sporty and competitive CEO (Adam) challenged other company CEOs. Now, they (the media) would like to produce a serial of articles about a female CEO. There I am, preparing to take part in the next Iron Man Race. This can set an example for women...it is a positive thing to do.

“Competing with the other guys”: Mary’s view of a good leader

When talking about her view of a good leader, Mary is very humble about being a female leader in a man’s world. Mary believes that men maintain natural advantages for being a leader. Yet she is not afraid to change herself, to obtain these qualities that her male peers have. This is the reason she wanted to become the first female CEO to compete in an Iron Man Race.

Becoming an "Iron woman" in a man’s world

Mary thinks a good leader has “gut feelings”.

I have a holistic picture of situations. I can easily see who is good at what, and I’m able to place the right person in the right spot. Feelings are important. Men are good at figuring things out logically and rationally, but I feel them.

By leaders with gut feelings, Mary means people with both an intuitive view of the market situations and sensitivity to other people’s emotions. In Mary’s own words, all the experiences from her athletic engagements and training contribute to developing her gut feelings further.

I am empathetic. This might be an advantage. I understand people: what they think and how their emotions work. Now I am training with men, in the top executives’ sports club. I am beginning to understand how they connect with each other. You have to be able to compete with them at the same level so they respect you. People trust you more if you are able to prove that you are one of them.

Both successful and unsuccessful experiences are crucial to her leadership development. As mentioned before, Mary is always ready to reflect on her own failures. The experiences are often analyzed and added to her further understanding about herself and others. “Learning about your own limits is where the next challenge begins.” A beneficial experience from her athletic commitments is “getting to know oneself”. “You get to know yourself, your body, your strengths and weaknesses through physical exercise. I didn't know this until I had committed myself to preparing for the competitions.”
Leadership is also about focus. Mary tells me that she developed a sense of focus when she was training cross-country skiing with many male top executives.

*During the whole training period, all we (Mary and the other male executives) talked about was the physical techniques. We discussed how to steer the skis, how to maintain them etc. I started to use the same terminology the guys were using...focusing on one thing, like they do. They stopped seeing me as a woman in the end, I think; and I felt I was one of them.*

Mary is very well aware of both the advantages of female leaders and male leaders (in her view, there is a distinct difference between men and women in terms of leadership). Mary explains why there are more men occupying the top positions.

*Competition is the name of the game. Men understand it much better than women do. Men have the instinct and they have developed the technique for winning; whereas women are often too laid back in this matter. The secret to staying competitive, for men, I have observed, is their obsession for quantifying and keeping records, as well as analyzing the results. Not only are they able to control the result but they also want to predict the development of the results. Men often use advanced digital gadgets to measure performance in sports. These gadgets provide statistical analysis, which shows the development of performance, and helps to predict future goals. Aren't we doing the same in our daily practices at work? We are equally dependent on the result of performance at work.*

Quantifying physical performance in sports reflects a natural male instinct that is beneficial both in sports activities and at work. “Women are not as competitive in this sense,” concludes Mary.

*You see, I often just show up in my old swimsuit to have a swim but had no intention of measuring my performance. I thought this was fine until I saw guys who were fully equipped with the best kit, from swimming trunks to result measuring equipment.*

Mary believes that the social Darwinian notion about natural selection explains why some people are able to “go further and faster than others”; and why the “fittest” are often able to claim power atop the hierarchical ladders. The enduring competitive “men” often manage the natural selection, according to Mary.
Look at the men who compete frequently, in marathons, long-distance cycling, skiing etc. These sports not only make you a winner, but they shape your endurance, both mentally and physically.

**Becoming an iron woman and being brave in the face of failure**

As much as Mary wants to appear as an athletic “iron woman” she realizes that extreme physical exercise has caused her some health problems. In one of the messages she wrote to me just a few weeks before the Swedish Iron Man Race in the summer of 2013, she explained that she had to drop out of the competition because of her injuries. She showed great disappointment in that message.

However, she very soon found a way to turn her ‘failure’ into another opportunity to be at the centre of public attention. After dropping out of the Iron Man Race, Mary published an article in the Industry Daily about how her body had given up during her intensive training. In the article, she framed her failure as a way of getting to know herself, including her body, in a constructive way in athletic endeavours.

Mary has experienced several moments of failure when pursuing an athletic lifestyle. When she participated in the annual Ladies’ *Vasanoppet* for the first time, she did not achieve the time for which she wished. Shame, embarrassment and disappointment all came to haunt her at that moment of failure. “I thought I was training and competing with the CCC1000 male executives, but I ended up amongst the 1000 worst performers.” Although frustrated, Mary has always been able to turn her experiences of failure into reflexive experiences in life. Each time she fails, she addresses the failure and concludes that she has learned a great deal about herself from them.

She told me that she saw her ability and courage in facing failure like ‘real athletes’ as one of her unique qualities for being a female leader. According to Mary, acknowledging one’s own weakness and failure might not be an easy thing, especially for a top manager in a large organization. However, she manages to turn such experiences to her advantage to show her strength as a leader.

Since our first meeting in the end of 2011, Mary has changed. Not only have her attitudes towards and interpretations around her lifestyle become more connected to her professional role, but the increasingly intensive physical training has also left its mark on her looks. She is tanned (due to travelling to sunny countries all year round to train) and her muscles are becoming more refined and toned. At our last lunch meeting, Mary chose an exclusive members-only lunch club. She was not in her trainers but in her heels and with
a careful hair-do. She looked confident, smart, professional and obviously physically fit.

**Healthy behaviours and the effects of role models**

Mary also emphasizes the roles of leaders in the learning processes. Expertise and leadership are crucial both for the development of a society and on an individual scale of life, according to Mary. Mary shows great respect for professional workers. She often refers to and quotes people who are regarded as societal icons, individuals who are famous and have legendary success-stories.

The former Swedish Prime Minister is one of those people whose words are often quoted by Mary. Mary claims that the values that the Prime Minister holds have influenced her life tremendously. She has been inspired by the Prime Minister’s choice of the ‘black box food delivery’. “I eat what is planned for me by the nutrition experts. So I say no to anything ‘outside the box’, anything that is not designed for my health and good lifestyle is rejected in a definite term”.

Often referring to societal iconic figures and their different approaches to life, Mary states that a good leader ought to be able to influence others in a subtle manner like the societal role models.

> You see, I intend to influence the culture in my organization slowly and gradually by setting an example and by recruiting more people like myself. I do not like to use forceful actions or radical measures to make drastic changes anymore. I have learnt that a good leader is able to make substantial changes in the organization and in life of employees just by ‘walking the talk’.

**Notes**

Since her childhood, Mary has learnt to strive for success in life. Success takes different forms in different phases in her life. Methods and efforts in pursuing success concern various practices. Choosing the right subject at school, finding the right network in which to socialize, as well as choosing the ultimate role model to lead one’s lifestyle and life path are all important experiences in Mary’s life.

Now, for Mary, a successful life is still typically indicated by a privileged social status, and this status is demonstrated through athletic endeavours. Mary told me that her reflections on a healthy lifestyle and leadership were
also the inspiration for her upcoming book. In the spring of 2013, she started to write a book about how to connect an athletic lifestyle with leadership.
Martin

The first meeting

I contacted Martin for my research because he had just received an award for being a “Healthy Leader” and actively influencing employees with his lifestyle. He became a media profile for winning this award. Martin agreed to meet me and after he had changed the appointment a few times, I finally made it to his office for our first meeting on a winter's morning in the beginning of 2012.

Martin’s company is located in the bustling centre of Stockholm city. I was five minutes early and the receptionist politely directed me to a seat in the lounge to wait for Martin. The lounge was furnished with two rows of white designer sofas. A huge plasma TV hanging in the centre of the wall was showing CNN news with muted sound. I sat down on the sofa where I could look into the glass-wall of a meeting room in which three men were sitting.

Although I was not able to hear anything they were saying, the conversation looked very lively. They took turns standing up to write things on the whiteboard and to speak. They were all dressed in slim-fit suits with colourful handkerchiefs in the top pockets. They all looked tanned and fit, which made a strong impression on me in the daylight of the gloomy winter morning.

I was surprised about the dress code in this office. People were smartly dressed, yet not in strict business-like grey or black, but they looked trendy and colourful. The three men in the meeting room were well-groomed. Their shoes were shiny and even their hair was carefully trimmed and styled.

Ten minutes passed, then one of the men came out and walked towards me. It was Martin. He wore a trendy suit with a perfect dimple in his tie. His outfit complimented his lean figure perfectly.

We shook hands and went into one of the meeting rooms. The room faced south above one of the main roads in the city; the noise from the street occasionally penetrated the room through the closed windows. Martin sat down facing the sun. He looked as if he had just come back from a tropical
vacation. His skin was tanned and radiated energy. “I just came back from a ski trip in Italy with a few friends.” Martin opened our conversation with this piece of information which revealed his athletic lifestyle. I assumed his friends were the other two other men from the meeting room. Martin seemed to be well-prepared for the topic we were going to discuss: the healthy lifestyle and leadership, about which Martin had apparently talked several times in his interviews with the media.

Martin’s Story

Childhood and upbringing

Martin is from a typical middle-class family. Both his parents are academics in economics and in human behaviour studies. Martin says, “Like anyone else, we were sent to different sport activities after school.” Martin played football, learned to swim, and even went to dance school for two semesters as part of his after-school activities. He did all sports because his parents thought they were necessary.

However, from age twelve onward, Martin began to take the initiative in choosing the sports he was more interested in. “I started to train and compete in swimming. Between the ages of 14 and 17, I competed on an elite level in swimming. My parents did not have much influence on me in this choice. I thought I was going to be a professional athlete then.” Looking back, according to Martin, his experiences in training and competing as an elite swimmer made him a more goal-oriented and focused person later in both life and work.

I learnt to be committed to what I do and to do it well. Training could be very boring at times, but I learnt to endure the boredom and focus only on improving myself and on winning the competitions. I am like this doing business today.

However, Martin gave up his dream of becoming a professional athlete. Instead, he studied a technical programme at high school. “But then I realized that I am more of a business man than an engineer.” After one year working as a swimming instructor for children and travelling around the world, Martin was more determined about what he wanted to do in life.

Martin gained his Bachelor’s degree in Management and Organizational Studies. After graduation, he had various jobs before finally funding the company he now leads with his brother. He worked first as a business
controller in one of the biggest companies in the fashion industry for almost two years, and then as a marketing director at a tobacco company for four years. He later became EMEA Director in a Swedish container-leasing company. Martin presents a positive summary of his career development path.

_I can say that my career development has been a successful one. The turnover, the scale of the market share and the number of employees I was responsible for were only increasing until finally I wanted another change in 2003. I think I got this sense of persistency from my training in swimming. You know, just do what it takes for the next goal in your life ..._

The “need for change” led to a turning point in Martin’s career. Martin and his brother found a business opportunity which aimed at providing more industry-customized recruitment and leadership development consultancy services. The company has grown from two people to 40 people. The company’s business areas cover recruitment, executive search and leadership coaching, as well as performance management strategies. The company has established activities in London, Copenhagen, Oslo and other cities in Sweden.

As the CEO, co-founder and partner of the company, Martin was very proud of the company’s steady growth with an average 5-10 per cent each year. “There were only the two of us at the beginning and then we grew to 26, then to 40. Now we are expecting a major expansion next year,” Martin said, looking very excited.

**Martin’s current work situation**

Martin named his company with a word which means “the one who provides guidance”. Providing guidance is what Martin strives to do both in terms of his business idea and his leadership approach. Since he co-founded his recruitment firm in 1994, the company has grown to become an experienced party in the field of recruitment, management and organizational development consultancy. Although the company first established its business on the Nordic market, it now operates on an international level. It has executed projects in over 35 countries in recent years. The company’s clients include both major international groups and smaller fast-growing companies. Martin says his goal is to include government agencies, municipalities and county councils as future clients.

Martin emphasized that the consultants working in his company all held a degree either in business or in behavioural sciences. “There are many behavioural scientists and psychologists working with us. They are also
experienced in organizational development. We help the companies to recruit, maintain and develop an ultimate workforce competence for organizational growth.” Martin thought managing a highly-educated and competent workforce was both a challenging and a privileged task. “I need to be very creative in terms of leadership. My consultants are not easily impressed, but it is fun to work with them.”

“Transforming” the organization in the name of health

Martin claims that he has found the best way to lead people in his company after being awarded the “Healthy Leader” prize. “People are impressed by this award. They see the fact that I work out and I try to influence the company culture with what I do as something positive. So now, they are starting to work out more frequently.”

It seems that Martin’s own health ideals spill over to his health promotion initiatives. Martin makes lot of effort in terms of collective health promotion activities to maintain an energetic, fit and physiologically young workforce.

A candidate for the “Healthy Leader” award must be an active and healthy person; and he or she must be inspirational and supportive of other employees in terms of their healthy living, too. Martin won the prize for his efforts to make substantial changes to improve the working environment and the health and well-being of his employees.

Now, Martin is recognized as a ‘healthy boss’ in his company. He finds people respect him more when his lifestyle endeavours are acknowledged as part of his leadership performance. Martin is more determined than ever to change the lifestyle behaviours of his employees. With some knowledge in behavioural science, and organizational psychology, Martin believes his methods of health screening and health profiling may create positive social comparisons amongst employees, which, in turn, may generate competitive behaviours in healthy living.

Yes, we have some employees here who are overweight but we have a health profile system which scans people’s health conditions so we know how to help them. I am sure that overweight people will change after working in the company for a while. People tend to compare themselves to others. The health screening programme puts people into different categories. They start to compare themselves to others, which may be a source of motivation.

Martin expresses his concerns about the “size issue”. He gives incentives to those employees who make the effort to exercise more frequently and to lose weight. For example, employees who exercise more often (on average twice
a week) enjoy higher training subsidies for gym membership. People are allowed to substitute going to the gym with weight watching/losing programs and abstinence programs.

Martin tells me that he also aims to organize between six and ten collective athletic activities each year. For example, every management meeting involves some sort of sporting activity. According to Martin, taking part in sports activities in a group also makes ‘social comparison’ an effective method. Martin believes that the collective sports activities imply an accepted physical capacity, based on which people may be motivated to compete with each other.

*People do not want to show up at these activities in worse physical condition than others. This in itself is a motivation for overweight people to make an effort to become more fit.*

Besides the actual interventions, Martin believes that building a healthy culture in his company can eventually change people’s attitudes and behaviours on the matter of health.

*We have an increasingly strong health culture now in the company. I believe we will attract people who share this value to come and work for us. We will also recruit those who are more in line with this culture. Eventually the existing employees will have to change their mind-set and behaviour.*

Martin believes that a fit leader can effectively inspire and influence employees.

*We study and analyze human behaviours in our field of business...I think the way a manager looks can also influence the employees’ attitude towards their own images to some extent. And in turn, this change of attitude may lead to changes in their behaviours.*

On one occasion, when Martin was telling me about the ‘healthy culture’ in his company, he lowered his voice and was careful to avoid someone overhearing his comments. “We still have some people in the company who are not physically fit. But I believe they feel the pressure now that ‘healthy’ has become increasingly emphasized in our company culture.”
Creating a younger workforce

Martin made the slogan “The Company Which Only Gets Younger” a headline in one of the major business newspapers. He explained how he makes his company “younger” by monitoring the employees’ physical capacity.

We run a test on people every year including running two kilometres and other forms of muscle training. Employees are given an individual value and the company gets the mean value of that. The aim is to measure the changes in people’s physiological age in comparison to their factual age. We compare individuals’ factual age with their physiological age. When we did it for the first time, we had an average factual age of 39 and the physiological age was also 39. Later, after some of the older employees had retired and younger employees been recruited, the average factual age was reduced to 36. No-one’s physiological age is higher than the factual age, whereas a few years ago we had someone whose physiological age was 82 while their factual age was only 45, so people are becoming younger physiologically through working-out.

The positive effect of the “younger” working force is noticeable, according to Martin. “I have increased 15 extra horsepower myself through doing the exercises with my employees. People are feeling less stressed and are happier in the office now,” Martin stated. “We manage to do more work, we have a stronger sense of solidarity and the whole machine has become stronger, too.” Apart from keeping people motivated and alert about their physical state, Martin keeps the company younger through recruiting a younger workforce. By implementing these measures, Martin believes that working on health promotion activities also leads to an enhanced employer image. “With this refreshing image, we are able to attract younger and more competent candidates to join the company.”

The leader as information provider in ‘healthy’ organizations

Martin feels that as the CEO and the owner of the company, he is responsible for providing employees not only with job opportunities, but also with ‘correct’ information for a healthy lifestyle. This includes what to eat, doing work-outs, participating in sports activities etc.

There is only so much we can do to make changes in people within the eight-hour legal working time. We have to make people focus on work when they are here at work. But what can be influential outside working hours is actual useful information about nutrition, diet, sports and other type of useful information about a healthy lifestyle. For example, we can pass on information about new trends in sports, new scientific discoveries about healthy living etc., with which we can influence people in a positive way even outside their working hours.
**Martin’s health ideals**

Martin summarizes his interpretation of the health ideal in three words: energy, fitness and anti-aging. A balanced diet and regular physical exercise are the sources of energy for Martin.

> What you eat determines how you perform in various activities. Eating right makes you more alert in daily working situations. The more you exercise the more energy you generate. You grow stronger, smarter and more patient. You become a better employee, a better parent and a better partner. There is no negative side effect to good health and physical exercise.

**Fitness**

For Martin, fitness is more about how one looks and the impression one makes on others. “A healthy appearance is also a source of energy for both you and people who work with you. Besides, it also makes people trust you more. It shows that you are in control of things.” Although Martin claims that people in his office normally dress casually if they are not meeting customers, judging from my few observations, people, including Martin himself, are often dressed smartly. “Of course you need to be prepared at all times to make a good first impression,” Martin explains.

**“Anti-ageing”**

Martin talks a lot about ageing and states that “reversing ageing” is an important objective. He firmly believes that a healthy lifestyle is a way to keep one’s physiological age younger than factual age.

> My own experience makes me believe in this. I feel younger and more energetic because of regular training and exercise.

Martin would also like to keep the average age in his company young. To do this, Martin tends to recruit younger people into his organization, and at the same time, he makes a lot of effort to keep the employees’ physiological age younger than their factual age by initiating health promoting activities at work.

**Martin’s lifestyle approaches**

**From golfer to athlete**

Martin explains that he began to work out more and do sports after he started in his current position as CEO. Martin described his journey of becoming the
healthiest boss in a tone of disbelief. Somehow, his healthy lifestyle started to grow and came to influence both his life and his work.

*In the beginning, I only went golfing with my customers, so I did some exercises just to keep up in good shape and train the core muscles for golfing. But when I later joined the executive skiing and running clubs, I began to realize more changes in both my work and life. One thing led to another, and now I am the ‘Healthy Boss’ of the year!*

Martin finds sports venues are good places to connect with clients. “I never really liked golf, for example. I thought it took too much time. But it allowed me plenty of time to get customers or potential customers to talk to each other. So I went along and now I enjoy it very much.” Martin does a lot more than golfing now. As mentioned earlier, he has joined the executive sports clubs where he meets many people who later bring positive influences into his business. Therefore, sports for Martin are a practical solution not only for improving his physical and mental skills, but also in leadership and business development.

*I have noticed that an active lifestyle has in fact changed my life in several ways. I have made many friends in sports clubs who have then also become important in my field of business.*

Martin states that being physically active and participating in running races has made him a more reputable and respectful leader. In his own words, within just two years, Martin “transformed from an ordinary frequent gym-goer (three times per week) to an athletic man in top-form”. This athletic image has brought much benefit to Martin,

*When I noticed that I had become a more convincing leader because of my running records, I started to exercise more purposefully. People started to admire me in a different way, if I may say so.*

Although participating in different sports and joining sports clubs has helped Martin to build larger social networks, he has also rapidly developed a genuine passion for doing sports. Martin explained that good health, leadership and work results are all connected.

*I have become addicted to running. Nowadays I run almost every day. I do feel that I am in my best form. I have joined an executive running club where I get to know many interesting people. I run with them and we enrol in running races in different places and in different countries.*
Martin runs or goes to the gym for at least one hour every day. He claims that he has also become a faithful participant in the Swedish Classic Circuit. In addition to running, skiing has become another of Martin’s biggest passions. He travels abroad with the skiing club. Martin sees a sign of the emergence of new elites amongst business executives who join exclusive sports clubs. For Martin, being a member of these clubs is not only about improving one’s athletic endeavours but also about enhancing one’s status in society.

We go to France, Italy or Switzerland. Normally we stay there for four or five days. These trips are a combination of doing sports, enjoying the view, good food and socializing with interesting business executives, many of whom you would come across somehow in business. Doing sports and combining fun and business is just great.

Maintaining balance in life

His training routine also led to a healthier diet, according to Martin. “It came naturally once I started to exercise. I eat more protein and vegetables now and I am more careful with alcohol.” Martin emphasized the idea of a balance in life. For him it means a balanced diet and a balance between work and working out, as well as in many other aspects in life such as marriage and raising children.

Martin divorced in 2009, and he shares the custody of two children with his ex-wife. He now lives with his girlfriend in one of the most prestigious suburbs in the northern part of Stockholm. He feels that after the divorce his life became more balanced. “Now there are two weeks I can concentrate on my own life, training, going out meeting friends etc. I also schedule travels mainly during these two weeks. Life has become simpler somehow.” Martin mentioned his girlfriend in our conversation a few times. He talks about her with pride and remarks that she keeps his life in balance.

My girlfriend works out a lot, too. We go running together. She is more active in races. She will be running the marathon later this spring. You should meet her. She also runs her own business; and she is a successful business woman!

Another person Martin mentions frequently is his assistant. Martin has a busy work schedule, but he is able to maintain a flexible working routine. He expresses much gratitude to his assistant. “In order to have good control at work, I am very dependent on my assistant Annika. With her help I am able to save some time for myself.” To Martin, his assistant also helps him to maintain the balance in life.
“Becoming a transformational leader”: Martin’s view of a good leader

Martin’s understanding of a good leader is inspired by the textbook concept of the “transformational leader”. That is, as Martin explained: “A good leader should have vision, mission and well-functioning communication skills.” However, Martin claims he offers new concepts in the understanding of a “transformational leader” based on his own eighteen years’ working experience.

Transforming others with positive influences

My leadership is the summary of what I have learnt during these years. I pick up the pebbles along the way. I use everything that has been useful, and that is my leadership.

Martin also gives a new definition for the term “transformational leadership”. According to Martin, transformational leaders are not only capable of infusing useful values in the organizational culture, but they should also be able to incorporate own experience of life in their leadership.

You see, I was not planning to become a ‘healthy boss’. I only exercised a bit more than the others. But when I realized that doing sports and exercising frequently had changed my life to a great extent, I needed to incorporate this experience in my leadership to make my experiences more influential for others. This way, I can transform the lives of my employees...In connecting my own experience of sports in my leadership, we have found the most effective way to energize our workforce. This is all about inspiration and motivation. In an organization like ours, we desire and select individual performance stars. These people demand a great leader who is able to bring inspiration into their minds. They do not need another performance star to look up to.

Although Martin denies his role as a ‘performance star’ in operational activities, he emphasizes that he needs to be inspirational to his employees in other aspects.

The biggest challenge with this leadership lies with me. I need to present the utmost performance at all times. That includes how I look and how I work, as well as how I live my life. I have to be ready to expose my life in front of my employees. I can’t say I am a better performer than my colleagues. But I can be a role model in the way that I energize them. I spread happiness and positive energy to the others. I hope I have achieved my role model effects in these aspects.
Martin stresses that the positive influence lies in ‘positive talk’ whereas negativity resides in ‘moaning’. “We don’t talk too much about private life issues at work. They generate negative feelings.”

The ability to absorb positive energy is the key to turning any bad situation to a good result. One must have this competence. I can’t be negative or passive on a bad day. I have to perform at my top potential and meet each person with positive energy. Because working for my company might be one individual’s most important career moment, I cannot turn them down. This is like athletes; they do not have an option not to be ready before a big competition just because they have a bad day. They, too, always need to perform to their utmost potential. I also have to cheer myself up when I have a really bad day. It is not always easy, but one should at least try.

Setting the ‘right tone’ of attitudes in an organization

“Being a leader means making people around you feel secure.” With this statement, Martin said he is always ready to deal with people’s sense of insecurity. He interpreted those who were not completely committed to the “healthy values” as demonstrating a “feeling of uncertainty” and “fear”. “Some people tend to moan about everything. I think it is fear, the fear and uncertainty in front of new challenges.” Martin gave me an example of how he deals with employees’ fear and uncertainties.

For example, the most common question from some of the employees would be how to find time to exercise when they are occupied by work, children, household etc. I talk to them about solutions with myself as an example. By that, I mean that I have a heavy workload. If I can manage to exercise, they should be able to as well. We also arrange coaching lectures to help people to establish a healthy lifestyle and cope with work and life. I do not believe people are really reluctant about these values. On the contrary, there are definitely more people who are enthusiastic about them.

Notes

After my interview with Martin, we have exchanged emails a few times and we have met for a follow-up meeting. I have also read some articles about the most recent development of Martin’s “healthy leadership” debut. His enthusiasm in influencing the lives of his employees stretches from providing information on healthy diets and organizing collective physical exercise to providing support to the employees’ family projects. Martin has even started
to provide support for in vitro fertilization treatment and adoption programmes for his employees.

In his own words, he is willing to “be a guidance and inspiration to employees as much as possible”. To Martin, being a role model literally means that the influence of his leadership permeates every aspect of people’s lives. Ageing is still seen as a great threat to productivity and creativity. Working against ageing remains one of Martin’s major missions. Living a healthy life is, for Martin, not only about enhancing the physical state, but it is also the presentation of care of others.
Chapter 5 presents the stories of five sporty top managers. Each of the five top managers provided a unique story about their experiences in athletic endeavours. They articulated their individualized understanding of their social encounters, and personal aspirations regarding lifestyle approaches and their views on good leaders. For example, Adam sees himself as the “creator of a ‘healthy’ organization”; Anna seeks to portray herself as a ‘super woman’; Mary challenges the male dominant executive world through “competing with guys on sporting venues”, etc. The stories of these five top managers show that they each understood athletic endeavours in unique ways, and they enacted interpretations of their experiences in athletic endeavours with distinctive approaches. Nonetheless, they all sought to utilize distinctive experiences in athletic endeavours to convey an image of themselves as good leaders.

The symbolic interactionists construe the formation of the sense of self of social actors as an ongoing interactive process that involves constant dialogue between the notion of “I” and “me” (e.g. Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). According to this theoretical view, the self that social actors seek to present normally contains expressions of wishful notions that differ from the ‘true’ state of being of a person (Cooley, 1922; Goffman, 1959). People actively ‘objectify’ themselves in self-presentational practices. They tend to create an imaginative image of themselves, which is often “better” than who they are (Goffman, 1959: 19).

According to Goffman, what people really convey in the process of self-presentation is “the conception we have formed of ourselves - the role we are striving to live up to … the self we would like to be” (Goffman, 1959: 19). Hence, the type of impression an actor seeks to create projects values, beliefs and goals to which the person aspires to adhere.

As mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, the dramaturgical notion of self-presentation concerns a process where people seek to define and understand themselves in a social situation, and to impress this understanding of self on others (Schlenker, 1980; Goffman, 1959). The self-presentation is therefore an integrated process that consists of four main elements (Schlenker, 1980; Goffman, 1959). They are, social actors’ self-expressions about the
assessments of the situational characteristics (within which social interactions occur), the evaluations of others with whom they frequently interact, and their views of an idealized self-image, as well as expressive performances in the "maintenance of expressive control" (Schlenker, 1980; 1985; Goffman, 1959). This is because people tend to form a "right" impression of selves, which is compatible in the given situation and which lives up to the imagined expectations of others (e.g. Schlenker, 1985; Cooley, 1922).

In this analysis, I look into how the top managers articulate ‘whom they want to be’ through evaluating situational characteristics, defining necessary qualities of themselves in that situation, and by relating to others. The analysis also pays attention to performative aspects of the self-presentation; that is, how the top managers adjust their utterances and/or actions to try to adhere to the imaginative view that they create in the stories about their athletic endeavours?

The analysis of the sporty top managers’ self-presentation is two-fold. In the first part of the analysis, I focus on examining particular verbal expressions in the top managers’ stories about themselves. I answer the following questions in this part of the analysis: first, how the sporty top managers define situational characteristics of the context of the leadership situation when talking about their engagement in athletic endeavours? How they describe an idealized image of themselves? How the top managers define their relations with others?

People always strive for successful self-presentation by controlling the minimum discrepancy between ‘who they are’ and ‘whom they want to become’ (Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1974; Schlenker, 1985). The second part of the analysis therefore mainly concerns how the top managers adjust their self-expressions (including verbal, bodily movement, clothing and appearance etc.) in order to avoid any discreditable information about themselves and to ensure that they convey the most adequate image that ‘fits’ the situational characteristics and the expectations of others. Therefore, in the second part of the analysis, I examine how the top managers use or control a broader range of expressive apparatus including appearance, emotions, feelings etc. to achieve ‘expressive control’ (e.g. Goffman, 1959). With this analysis, I intend to answer the last research question about how the top managers enact performative strategies to avoid any discreditable information about themselves.

As mentioned earlier, the term ‘sporty top managers’ is descriptive of ‘who they are’ as the decision makers in their respective organizations, and their common passions in sports, in vigorous sporty activities and competitions. From this point on, I use the term ‘athletic leaders’ to refer to the idealized
view of self that is outlined by top managers through the self-presentational practices. It is shown in Chapter 5 that when telling their stories, they all used athletic values and the meanings of athleticism as major themes to address their experiences, both at work and in private life, although they articulated individualized wishful notions about themselves. The analysis thereby focuses on how the top managers infuse personal values in lifestyle behaviours with the understanding of themselves as occupants of the leadership role.
Part I Creating an imaginative view of self as an athletic leader

Cooley (1922) contends that people tend to create an idealized view of themselves in daily self-presentational practices. He sees this as a uniquely creative act with which social actors are capable of making new self-meanings and thereby engendering new elements in the understanding of the social world. On this point, he writes:

*If we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we improve or ‘train ourselves from the outside inward?’ And the same impulse to show the world a better or idealized aspect of ourselves finds an organized expression in the various professions and classes, each of which has to some extent a cant or pose, which its members assume unconsciously, for the most part, but which has the effect of a conspiracy to work upon the credulity of the rest of world.*

(Cooley, 1922: 352-53)

In this part of the analysis, I illustrate how the sporty top managers use narrative skills to convey their understanding of an idealized view of themselves through interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours. I pay attention to how they, by using verbal devices, integrate their evaluation of the situational characteristics, the relations with others, as well as wishful notions about themselves in one self-presentational process.

6.1 Setting the scene with meanings of athleticism

A “scene” in dramaturgical research is defined as the context of a situation where self-presentations occur. It is defined as “the background of the act, the situation where it occurs” (Burke, 1974:370). Typically, people tend to organize their verbal expressions to frame “a quality of communication that causes others to accept one meaning over another” (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996: xi).
Goffman contends that people’s utterances and actions in daily life is primarily a process of self-presentation in which people attempt to induce the audience to judge them the way they desire. As performers on the stage, people enact self-presentational practices, not only to outline an idealized self-image, but also to maintain the coherence in self-expressions through shaping the audience’s interpretations of the situational context and the other interactants in the same situation (1959).

Furthermore, in the process of self-presentation, people evaluate and convey the situational characteristics to others in order to find their way to present an adequate self-image in a particular situation (Schlenker, 1980, 1985). This evaluation of the situational characteristics typically contains information about situational norms, rules, regulations and important figures in that situation (ibid.).

In the analysis of ‘setting the scene’, I focus on examining verbal expressions that are value-laden in terms of the definition of the nature of the situation in which they are situated. This analysis finds that the top managers provide ‘evaluations’ about the situational characteristics mainly when they talk about their general views about the “childhood and upbringing” and the “current work situation”. They define the situational characteristics with athleticism in the centre, based on which they outline situational rules in the name of ‘health’; and they claim an elitist status through highlighting the importance of athleticism and physical mastery.

6.1.1 Asserting situational norms with athletic values

People tend to enact verbal expressions in hindsight to shape the understanding of a situation by highlighting some values and the effects of these values in that situation (Goffman, 1973). In this study, I find that in retrospective storytelling, the top managers are able to reassemble an idealized “illusion” of the self as if they were observing their own lives through the “looking glass” (e.g. Moore et al., 1979: 555; Cooley, 1922). They develop a plot about themselves where they recall their past behaviour from an observer’s perspective. This way, they make sense of some part of the historical experiences, or even distort their stories slightly – in order to bring forth the values and beliefs that they intend to emphasize in the current state of life.

By telling stories with retrospective verbal skills, I find that the top managers develop a plot in their stories through which they convey their understanding of the situation that is tinged with the athletic values and beliefs that they personally held at the time. In this plot, the top managers give meaning to past
life experiences based on how they assess their present state of life. They affirm the legitimacy of present behaviours by citing historical experiences that are intertwined with athletic meanings. They define athleticism as an indispensable attribute in life and work, the solution to an infinite self-project, and a (correct) choice in life. Within the same plot, they also emphasize the importance of facing failures like ‘real athletes’, and they pronounce a salient preference of masculine values.

**Athleticism as an indispensable attribute in life and work**

*Performers may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had and that they have never had to fumble their way through a learning period.*

(Goffman, 1959: 47)

With the above quote, Goffman points out that when people seek to present an idealized view of themselves to others, they may distort historical events to create supportive plots in their stories (1959). They accomplish this through linking historical events with the values, beliefs that they see as important attributes to the idealized view of self as the occupant of a particular social role.

In this study, I find that when the top managers talk about their childhood and upbringing, as well as the important values they hold in retrospect, although each describes different experiences in life and work, they all emphasize that athleticism is indispensable in life and work. They unanimously interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours since childhood as a learning process, in which they have also acquired essential social skills and leadership competences.

The five top managers claim that their engagement in athletic endeavours is an important attribute of self-knowledge, skills and competences both in private life and in the workplace. They typically cite historical experiences in athletic endeavours to make sense of their progress in life and at work. For example, Adam believes that his father prepared him for a future career as a leader by encouraging him to engage in sporting activities. Adam constantly connects this childhood experience with a series of successful actions he conducts in his CEO position. His childhood athletic endeavours have given him courage in his later career development. He claims he learned to grow his company aggressively from his experiences of winning sport competitions.
Similarly, Dan talks about his experiences at boarding school where sport and athletic activities and academic subjects are regarded as equally important. Dan asserts that he learned collaborative skills through playing rugby in the school. When he became a leader, he used the same approach to grow his leadership competence. That is, he engaged in individual sports such as karate and cycling to gain individual strength as a leader. Like Adam and Dan, Martin is confident that training to become an elite swimmer in his adolescent years paved the way for his career successes today. He learned to be persistent, always strive to win, and always seek to improve himself.

Furthermore, like the men, Mary and Anna attribute the acquisition of the ‘correct’ leadership skills to their experience of competitive sport. Mary claims that she learned to become a leader like her male peers by learning how they maintain competitiveness in sports. According to Mary, women do not naturally have leadership skills such as competitiveness, the focus on performance etc. Yet Mary believes that because she has been associated with competitive activities since childhood and she currently engages in intensive sport competitions, she is able to overcome her inherent ‘weaknesses’.

Anna worked as an instructor at a gym before her management career in the IT industry took off. She expresses tremendous gratitude for her experience of working in the gym. For Anna, physical mastery is the basis for a ‘super human’ who is able to face the severe challenges of her industry.

Moreover, the top managers claim that they have acquired different types of knowledge and skills by engaging in different types of sporting activities. Team sports such as football and rugby make a good team player and collaborator; whereas individual sports such as running, swimming, spinning and cycling contribute to learning strength, persistence and patience. I find that the top managers in this study place particular emphasis on endurance sports such as long-distance running, skiing, swimming or cycling as disciplines that represent the type of qualities that a good leader needs to acquire.

Five sporty top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours throughout their lives as an important feature in social learning. For them, learning to compete, collaborating in a team, striving for victory and success, being determined and persistent, are crucial attributes for a successful life. By telling their stories in retrospect, they manage to link the notion of athleticism with their social learning processes and their present achievements in life.

Through their childhood memories, the top managers unanimously conclude that they have not only learnt sporting prowess in early life by engaging in athletic endeavours, but they have also acquired most important skills and
competences that are necessary both in life and in the career development. In hindsight, their passion for sports is described as a crucial and indispensable step for social learning and social adaptation.

**Athleticism is the solution to an “infinite self-project”**

According to the top managers, athleticism is not only the means towards good health, but it is also the very source of knowledge that has led them to a successful career and a good life. For Adam and many others, good health does not have a concrete definition. It is more about a process where people constantly strive for the continuous enhancement of physical and mental capacity. Adam makes an impressive statement when telling his story, saying that “staying healthy is a lifestyle. How you live your life is who you are”. With this, he defines life as a constant process in which people ought to strive ceaselessly for a better state of self through enhancing physical mastery.

Anna deliberately articulates that “health is an infinite project” and athleticism is the efficient tool in this project. Dan sees being able to ‘modify’ one’s physique - from resembling a typical rugby front row player, to a lithe and slender runner’s physique - as an effective approach to a healthy and constructive life. For Dan, endeavours as such represent the strength and qualities that are required not only in leadership situations but also in life in general. With these statements, the top managers broaden the effects of athleticism from enhancing physical mastery to the infinite project of maintaining “a better life”.

Moreover, Dan believes that modern leadership is about “making changes in the lives of others”. For Dan, promoting the ideal in athleticism is to foster the view amongst others that life is an infinite project for improvement. In this project, people may gain strength and learn the skills to deal with obstacles in sporting activities.

Viewing life as an infinite project, and constantly interpreting their experience from athletic endeavours by emphasizing noticeable effects of athleticism both in private life and in work-related situations, the top managers blur the distinction between work and life. They thereby reconfirm their responsibility and authority to influence others at places of work and in their private lives.

**Athleticism is a life choice**

I find that in retrospective storytelling the top managers choose to interpret previous experiences in the way that they believe is more convincing in terms of conveying certain values, goals and beliefs that they intend to project with their stories. Hence, their stories seem to deviate slightly from “true events” at times.
The top managers use this asymmetrical attribution in their narratives to bring forth the essence of the self-disciplinary qualities. For example, the top managers generally highlight their inner strength as the major driving force in the commitment to athletic pursuits while downplaying the external influences on their behaviours except for the influence from “social superiors” such as their parents, older siblings and other iconic figures in society.

Physical education has been an important part of the school curriculum in Sweden and most other European countries. It is therefore not surprising that all top managers in this study have been engaged in sporting activities since childhood. However, the top managers in this study tend to describe their engagement in athletic endeavours both in childhood and in their current phase of life as a unique self-development process based on either their ‘inner strength’ or the influences of parents, older siblings or other societal role models.

The total neglect of the situational attributions - such as culture or educational policies - as possible factors influencing their motivation in committing to an athletic life style might be due to the absence of specific factual memories (e.g. Moore et al., 1979). Yet describing a memory by overtly emphasizing “dispositional attribution” (result of internal characteristics) is a sign that the values and beliefs people express in these memories are deeply internalized in the present occurrences (Moore et al., 1979: 554).

Hence, the understatement of the situational attributes may be a way for the top managers to express their deep commitment and attachment to athletic values. They express the athletic values as part of their “internal characteristics” either intentionally or unintentionally. Moreover, by stressing the importance of internal motivation and commitment to an active lifestyle and physical endeavours in life, the top managers forge a general impression that a healthy lifestyle is a matter of personal choice, and that this personal choice reflects self-regulative strength within a person.

For example, Dan talks about how he has achieved significant modification of his physique purely based on his “inner strength”. Dan has transformed his body from that of a typical rugby forward to a new look which is slender and with well-defined muscles just like an elite runner. He has achieved this modification by spending a lot of time with a personal trainer at the gym, and by participating in running races with his management team. Although this ‘body modification’ may be an outcome of the pressure from the currently booming running culture in Sweden, or simply based on constant challenges from his peers at work who often participate in running races, Dan prefers to link his efforts with his own persistence and goal-oriented qualities. By
recounting his experience of making personal choices and initiating changes in his life this way, Dan underscores important self-disciplinary qualities - such as being self-regulating, self-controlling and self-reliant - as a leader.

Like Dan, Adam chooses to formulate his career path as a success story that is based solely on his personal efforts in every step of his life with athleticism as the source of strength. Adam took over the position of CEO of his family firm from his father’s hands. It is therefore doubtful if every opportunity that he has been given has been based completely on self-reliant efforts. However, in telling his stories through emphasizing the ‘inner strength’ of the self, Adam demonstrates his belief in self-disciplinary qualities.

**Facing ‘failure’ like ‘real athletes’**

Furthermore, while defining life as an infinite project in which people need to enhance the self through the maintenance of good health, the top managers also suggest that people ought to face life’s obstacles like real athletes. Four of the five top managers in this study have gone through difficult divorces. When they talk about their experience of divorce, most of them feel the real pain lies in the sense of ‘failure’ it brings.

In order to overcome the painful feelings caused by failure, the top managers often draw on athletic spirits as metaphors to rationalize the sense of ‘shame’ in failure as such. For example, Adam describes his divorce by saying that “It was like losing a match without even having understood the competition”. Then he states that physical strength is a prerequisite for overcoming significant life obstacles. Doing sports makes him stronger physically and mentally in times of distress and despair. According to Adam, real athletes do not spend time feeling sorry for themselves, but work (train) even harder for the next competition. Hence, besides the energy and strength, he has also learned to deal with life obstacles and failures in the same way as real athletes. Viewing life as a process of continuous improvement, Adam believes that he becomes a better person and a better leader through persistently engaging in athletic endeavours.

Moreover, while often avoiding talking about experiences that relate to failure, the top managers always manage to re-formulate such experiences as a learning process, which is inspired by real athletes. For example, Mary was deeply upset by her failure to cope with intensive training before the Iron Man Race. This is partially because she maintained a very high media exposure about her commitment to the race. She felt disappointment and shame. However, by drawing on athletic values and spirits, she managed to turn this failure into powerful statements, with which she meant to inspire many others. She wrote an article, which was later published in the same business press that
was supposed to report her success story in the race. In this article, she stated that people, especially leaders, ought to face failure like real athletes, who are good at turning senses of shame into motivation and new energy for the next challenge.

The top managers in this study have described different life obstacles which have made them feel as if they have failed in an important competition. Although difficulties in life take various forms, these top managers unanimously prescribe one solution to the problems they encounter in life: that is, to exercise and to master life through retaining heightened physical mastery.

Hence, by interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours through slightly distorting the “true event”, the top managers are able to bring forth the prominent role of self-disciplinary qualities in the workplace when defining the situational characteristics. With this, they reaffirm that athletic values nurture the type of self-disciplinary qualities that one needs to acquire both in private life and at work (e.g. Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011).

**Athleticism and masculinity**

In this study, I find that the top managers assert that athleticism is an indispensable attribute in life and work through highlighting the prominence of masculine values. Socially, athletic values such as aggressive competitiveness, competence, confidence, power and independence are typically conveyed by and through an athletic image; and these traits are commonly thought to define masculinity (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011: 207). The top managers, when plotting their stories about athletic endeavours, emphasize that the masculine qualities that they retain from athletic endeavours - such as competitiveness, self-reliance, aggression – are the most desirable qualities for a leader.

Although the male top managers never acknowledge the issue of gender, they tend to take the general notion of masculine values as necessary qualities for a leader for granted. When they talk about their “ideal views of a good leader”, they often describe an image that resembles a self-disciplined, aggressive, competitive athlete hungry for success. This way, they infuse socially acknowledged athletic masculinity with desired qualities of a ‘good leader’.

Furthermore, in many cultures, the techniques and skills of some sports are often harnessed and organized in contemporary education to sustain and improve male conduct (Keane, 2009: 165; Messner, 1992). Various sports disciplines, such as football, rugby and boxing, are concerned mainly with masculine ideals (Courtenay, 2009). Yet social meanings of masculine values
alter and develop from context to context, between diverse social groups and individuals. In this study, the top managers define a specific type of athletic masculinity through talking about their preferences in different types of sport.

According to the top managers, running a marathon or participating in Vasaloppet is a process where they learn to use their strength and to overcome their weakness. By illustrating the desired qualities of a leader through drawing on the type of physical and mental strength that is required in endurance sports, the three male top managers project a refined type of masculine trait in this particular circumstance. This masculine image indicates the self-disciplinary qualities of a person from a new prospect of body management. The top managers outline an image of a self-disciplined athletic leader who is not only able to control situations at work, but also attains physical mastery.

While male top managers tend to overlook their ‘masculinized’ view of ‘good leaders’, the two female top managers inclined at first to deny any major distinctions between men and women in the top positions. However, when we continued to discuss the issue of gender in leadership, Anna and Mary both stated that they were able to confront ‘innate’ vulnerabilities as women in leadership positions through persistent efforts in athletic endeavours.

Mary later claimed, “Men know better about the name of the game” in leadership. According to her, men are generally more result-orientated and are competitive, just like elite athletes. Mary observed that male executives are more like athletes because they are more likely to use statistics and advanced technologies (or gadgets) to keep track of the results of their performance, whereas women, such as herself, tend to focus on enjoying the process of doing sports. And this, according to Mary, explains why fewer women than men manage to climb to the top of the career ladder. Mary thereby suggests that women have to work on their ‘innate weaknesses’ in order to become as good leaders as many of their male peers. She also claims that the capabilities and insights she has managed to acquire in her athletic endeavours have helped her to become a better leader “just like the other guys”.

Anna reveals her worship of masculine characteristics by problematizing her own feminine self. She ‘confronts’ her innate ‘feminine vulnerability’ by focusing on controlling her feminine appearance and making efforts to gain acknowledgement from her male peers through engaging in athletic endeavours. For example, she avoids appearing in the office in obviously feminine outfits. She believes that she needs the latest news and knowledge of sports to be recognized as the leader of the ‘pack’ (of male co-workers). She also suspects that winning sport competitions may be a more convincing
evidence of her qualities as a leader in the eyes of her male co-workers than her formal education and the professional experience on her CV.

When talking about their views of a ‘good leader’, the male and female top managers expressed their thoughts differently. However, through highlighting similar masculine characteristics, together, they constructed a masculine image that resembles a real athlete who is competitive, hungry to win, and is always result-focused. This masculine image is also projected by their muscle tension, and the lithe, slender body of a typical marathon runner.

6.1.2 Defining situational rules in the name of ‘health’

While claiming athleticism as an important attribute in life and at work, the top managers also constantly emphasize the importance of establishing a ‘healthy’ culture in their respective organizations when telling their stories. For example, as shown in the stories of the top managers, they have all described the benefits of a healthy culture for individuals and in an organization, following which they give detailed descriptions of how they implement athletic approaches in health management in their respective organizations.

With this, I find that the top managers not only define the situational characteristic with athletic values that they personally hold, but they also seek to outline situational rules in the name of maintaining good health at the workplace. They use their understanding of the situational norms to elaborate the importance of health and healthy lifestyle. Naturally, for the sporty top managers, becoming ‘healthy’, and behavioural regulations that are relevant to becoming healthy, serve as the “situational rule” (e.g. Schlenker, 1980). They assert such a situational rule through defining health with athletic values, claiming the central role in leading ‘healthy’ organizations and incorporating athletic values in organizational processes.

Defining health with athletic values through meaning alignment

The top managers explain that a ‘healthy organization’ contains the most sustainable, effective, creative workforce. Thereby, they assign the responsibility of creating such a sustainable, healthy organization to themselves. When talking about their health ideals and their own approaches in building the healthy lifestyle, as well as their approaches in making changes in their respective organizations in terms of promoting the ideas of health, I find the top managers use the terms around health, healthy, fitness and athleticism interchangeably as if the meanings of these terms are indistinguishable.
I label this verbal technique “meaning alignment”. In using this term, I point out that the top managers do not only align the notion of athleticism with health in their elaborations about health ideals and leading healthy organizations; but they also constantly merge their personal beliefs and values regarding athleticism in their definition of the organizational situation and their role in influencing others in their respective organizations. This way, they managed to define situational rules in the name of ‘health’.

Moreover, by aligning and merging meaning frameworks of health, fitness and athleticism, they re-define the notion of health and healthy with a strong emphasis on athleticism; and they bring forth the aspect of fitness, the capacity, size and shape of the body in this definition of health. By constantly drawing on their own experiences in athletic endeavours and emphasizing their responsibilities in “bringing along others”, they articulate their intention in laying the basis of an organizational culture that centres around athleticism, and they assign to themselves a central role in this situation by claiming the responsibility (and authority) for ‘leading healthy organizations’. Hence, not only do the top managers define the situational rules with personally held athletic values, they also claim a central role as the ‘regulator’ in this the situation of ‘health management’.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being”, so the concept of health and its implications is not limited to physiology and the psychological realm (e.g. Ryff & Singer, 1998). This suggests that health is viewed as a social process rather than a concrete achievable end-state, which involves actors’ constant interactions with and interpretation of their social, cultural and political surroundings (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Although the notion of health is rarely defined in concrete terms, it is generally thought to have obvious positive meanings that indicate the optimal state of physical, mental and social condition of a person. The plural nature of the concept of health leads on the one hand to ambiguous definitions; on the other hand, it opens up opportunities for new interpretations of it in different social and cultural settings (Lupton, 1992).

In this study, I have found that the top managers describe health, fitness and athleticism as one and the same approach. They link the notion of health with their embodied experiences - such as empowered, energized sensations - to add positive connotations in athletic endeavours under the name of health. The top managers define the bodily and somatic sensations after an intensive section of working out as the “healthy feeling”. By doing this, they align athletic values such as competitiveness, power and success with the so-called healthy approach to life and work. For example, for Adam, being healthy means being “always in action”. He describes the “great feelings” after a good
session of running, cross-fit training or cycling as “being energized. “You gain two more hours’ energy if you exercise for one hour,” he asserts. And Adam believes that everyone at work needs this extra amount of energy to accomplish what they do.

From a neurochemical perspective, people may experience pleasant feelings, which are the consequence of an increased secretion of “pleasure chemicals” such as dopamine and serotonin after an intensive workout (Rose, 2003). In fact, addictive behaviours and obsessions in sporting activities may be caused by the “positive” attachment to such somatic experiences of “great feelings”. Over time, this “positive addiction” may lead to health risks such as exhaustion and physical fatigue (Crawford, 1984). Without rationally problematizing the potential ‘dark side’ of exhaustion and fatigue, which are common syndromes amongst athletes, the top managers assertively align post-workout neurochemical reactions and somatic feelings with the concept of healthy; and they vigorously encourage others to commit to athletic endeavours as they do.

Furthermore, the top managers use statements that mainly reflect their own values and beliefs to define the organizational situation, and their role in the organizations. For example, I find that statements such as “health is about the ever-enhancing physical capacity, personal choices in life and a constant goal-achieving process people ought to carry out throughout their lives”, or “being active and sporty keeps you healthy” are cited repeatedly by the top managers when they talk about their responsibilities in leading the ‘healthy organizations’.

Based on their own values and beliefs in life, for the sporty top managers “leading healthy organizations” is equivalent to discovering the infinite capacity of human resources through enhancing physical mastery. For example, Martin requires employees to undergo a regular physical test by measuring their blood pressure and pulse after making them run on the treadmill for 10 minutes. He aims to improve the physical condition amongst employees by persuading them to engage in athletic activities. He also uses the standardized Body Mass Index to define the basic health conditions of employees. By emphasizing physical capacity and the BMI factor as major health indicators, Martin and many other top managers define the notion of health based on the shape, size and capacity of the body, and they design general rules to promote and manage health in their organizations based on this re-formulated notion of health. However, little has been mentioned about the actual physical, mental and social well-being of their employees.
Claiming the central role in leading ‘healthy’ organizations

When telling stories about their athletic endeavours, the top managers emphasize their role in leading ‘healthy organizations’. They project themselves as policy makers and role models in collective health management. By delineating a prominent role in “leading healthy organizations” they are able to instil personally held athletic values into interventions of collective health management. For example, Adam adds ‘healthy’ as one of the three vision watchwords together with ‘innovation’ and ‘growth’. His company subsidizes the enrolment fee for employees in a few major sporting events such as Vasaloppet, the Stockholm Marathon and other races within the Swedish Classic Circuit. Adam, like many others, implements health-screening programmes.

Adam and Martin both initiated health promotion programmes in their organizations. In these programs, people are primarily categorized into three main classifications based on screening measures such as Body Mass Index, blood pressure, and lifestyle surveys. These categories are labelled green, red and blue, representing ‘healthy’, ‘in need of help’ and ‘unhealthy’ respectively. Adam organizes sports events, outlines exercise routines for employees, and designs health promotion activities in his company in the hope that more people will move up from either the ‘in need of help’ or ‘unhealthy’ groups. He also provides training courses to his regional managers based on his health philosophy so that they can take on the leadership role and pass on the athletic values in the regional departments.

Moreover, while taking about interventions in collective health management, the top managers are unanimous about their own responsibility in terms of providing ‘correct’ health information to employees. While the sporty top managers work on policy making and regulating healthy behaviours in a formal, structured manner, they also focus on ‘walking the talk’ through role modelling athletic values to their employees.

Anna creates informal health rituals in her organization. She has initiated an office fruit break everyday around 2pm. She also cycles to work and parks her bike in the most obvious spot outside her office in order to influence more employees to follow her example. Dan enjoys his reputation as a sporty leader. He believes that he is able to change the lives of others through demonstrating his own athletic endeavours. Dan told me that when he held the Country President position in one of the former Eastern European countries, he tried to ‘arouse health awareness’ amongst his employees through presenting his own athletic endeavours such as mountain-biking and karate in the company’s newsletters. Dan believes that he is able to make more people reconsider their lifestyles by presenting his own persistency in athletic endeavours.
Incorporating athletic values in organizational processes

I notice that while telling their stories the top managers constantly seek to incorporate athletic values into organizational processes. This way, they strengthen the ‘situational rules’ by adding convincing notions such as the meanings of athleticism.

In asserting the situational characteristics by placing athleticism in the centre and claiming the authority of the leading role in such a situation, the top managers also express their intentions to merge athletic values in organizational processes such as selection and recruitment. The top managers deliberately articulate a preference for individuals who are ‘fit’, both in terms of professional criteria and physically. The top managers believe that employees ought to hold similar health values when they enter the company, so that they are compatible with the ‘healthy’ culture of their organizations.

When sporty top managers express athletic values in their life stories, they constantly link these values with their role as leaders. Not only do they want to lead healthy organizations by presenting themselves as athletic leaders, they also assume the responsibility and authority for creating the most ‘fit’ workforce based on the core values and beliefs of athleticism. For example, Martin claims that his objective of “reducing the physiological age” of employees in his organization is realized through a two-pronged approach by selecting young and healthy candidates to his company and by ‘reversing’ the actual age of the workforce by encouraging employees to engage in athletic endeavours.

Anna emphasizes that a highly competitive IT company like the one she is leading is in need of more ‘super humans’ and especially more ‘super women’. These ‘super humans’ are characterized by both professional qualities and personal strength. According to Anna, people with heightened physical capacity - who constantly strive for success and power just like athletes - are truly capable of dealing with intensive competition. Anna also wants to increase the quota of females in management positions. She deliberately expresses her intention to bring more ‘super women’ like herself into the company. In fact, when we met for this study, she had already handpicked three sporty and athletic females for the Nordic Management Team.

Adam claims that he would prioritize competence and expertise when initiating a recruitment process. However, he also stresses that “among two equally competent individuals” he would simply choose the one who appears to be healthier, more active and fitter. Adam articulates an obvious preference for individuals who actively engage in athletic endeavours in their spare time just like himself, especially those who run marathons or participate in the
Swedish Classic Circuit. “I know these people like I know myself,” Adam says. Nonetheless, Adam is confident that he is capable of ‘transforming’ anyone who is not fit into a healthy and athletic person over time once they join the company. Hence, according to Adam, creating a healthy workforce involves both selecting the most ‘fit’ persons and transforming the ‘unhealthy’ and ‘unfit’ individuals.

6.1.3 Claiming an elitist status with athleticism

In the process of self-presentation, people enact self-expressions to seek to highlight their social status or belongingness to a particular social group (Goffman, 1959). Scholars have indicated that social actors use their engagements in leisure activities and sports to accumulate “cultural capital” and to indicate their “belongingness” to a social class (Bourdieu, 1978; Ulseth & Seippel, 2011). Previous studies focusing on the formation of leaders’ sense of self have indicated that business leaders are primarily interested in establishing a legitimized status in such a process (Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

In my study, I find that the sporty top managers seek to use the notion of athleticism as a symbol of an elitist status as leaders. By emphasising the ‘exclusiveness’ of being a member of many ‘executive-only’ sport clubs, they define a new form of elitism in a situation where they assert athleticism as the core value.

When assessing the situational characteristics by asserting situational norms and delineating situational rules based on their currently held athletic values, the top managers unanimously emphasize their role as leaders in that environment by highlighting their responsibility and authority to make changes in that situation. At the same time, they also tend to stress their ‘exclusive’ status as leaders by claiming they are the “emerging new elites” (Martin) with prominent qualities just like “real athletes”.

Many top managers are members of executive-only sport clubs. They like to highlight the exclusiveness of this membership and indicate that this has become a new attribute of the elitist status of business leaders. This membership of executive-only sport clubs makes a salient distinction between themselves and others.

Martin deliberately expresses his belief in the “emergence of new elites” amongst athletic leaders in the business world. He travels to Alps and goes skiing with his fellow executive friends each year. He has joined an executive sports club where they train each year for the Swedish Classic Circuit. He
takes an athletic lifestyle as such as a distinctive characteristic that defines the prestigious status of himself and others like him.

Mary - who believes people with a higher social status are generally happier than others – views athletic endeavours as a way of obtaining and expressing her ‘belongingness’ to a socio-economically advanced elite group. Furthermore, when Adam initiated his series of ‘duels’ with other leaders in business organizations, he made it clear that only individuals who occupy the position as the CEO of listed companies are entitled to challenge him. He made a salient linkage between the status and competence of a CEO and physical competitiveness.

The above examples show that the top managers begin to mobilize articulations about their athletic endeavours to ‘flesh out’ their prestigious status as leaders. By expressing overt pride when talking about belongingness to the exclusive executive-only sports clubs, they constantly make distinctions between themselves and others in terms of athleticism. This way, they infuse meanings of athleticism into their understanding of the elitist status in the leadership role. This new attribute of elitist status reflects their socio-political superiority through the maintenance of enhanced physical mastery in endurance sports.

This part of the analysis finds that instead of objectively assessing the social situations and conveying that assessment in the self-presentational practices, the top managers are inclined to use assertive statements to define the characteristics of the social environment based on the athletic values they currently hold. They assert that their personal athletic values form the basis of situational norms in their respective leadership contexts; they thereby define that situational rules of ‘health’ management primarily accentuate athleticism; and they claim an elitist status with their rigorous engagements in athletic endeavours and their membership of executive-only sport clubs. By defining situational characteristics this way, they set the scene for later presenting themselves as leaders with athletic qualities. In other words, they create a “conception” that athletic leaders are a natural outcome of the situational needs (e.g. Goffman, 1959: 19).

The analysis indicates that the top managers incorporate meanings in lifestyle behaviours with their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role through creating ‘plots’ in their stories that are centred on socially acknowledged core values of particular lifestyle behaviours (in this case, athletic endeavours). Emphasizing the importance of these values both in private and professional life they pave the way for creating an idealized image as leaders based on lifestyle behaviours. This way, they generate new nuances of self-meanings in understanding the self as leaders.
6.2 “Scripting” an idealized role-image with athletic values

In dramaturgy, ‘script’ refers to verbal lines and directions for actors in a staged play, which is built upon the framing of the ‘scene’ (Benford & Hunt, 1992:38). Scripts of a role are often built upon frames of meaning that are constructed in the scene, which provide the collective definition of the situation (Benford & Hunt, 1992). In this study, I use the term ‘script’ to illustrate how the sporty top managers describe ‘wishful notions’ in an imaginative view of themselves that is consistent with the situational cues. I pay attention to manners in which the top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours in lifestyle approaches to support their views of a good leader.

The previous sub-section of this analysis illustrates that when telling their stories about their athletic endeavours, the top managers create a plot to define the situational characteristics where athletic values are asserted as central themes. In this plot, the top managers actively interpret their experience also to define the situational norms, rules and their role as the major ‘regulator’ in implementing the rules. They also create an elitist status in that situation by infusing athleticism notions. The top managers use this ‘scene’ to lay the value basis for ‘scripts of the role’ in the self-presentation. They seek to keep to a coherent ‘script’ about how they ought to behave and look, as well as what moral codes they need to apply in accordance with the situational characteristics that they have outlined.

...[W]e find performers often foster the impression that they had ideal qualifications for the role, and that it was not necessary for them to suffer any indignities, insults, and humiliations, or make any tacitly understood ‘deals’, in order to acquire the role.

(Goffman, 1959: 46)

The above quote by Goffman explains that people enact self-expressions as self-presentational practices to convey important values, beliefs that are vital for their understanding of self as occupants of a social role. In this process, they attempt to induce the audience to believe that they are, without any extra efforts, ‘naturally’ the fit candidates for the role in a particular situational context (Goffman, 1959).

In social life, people tend to imitate athletes to strive for societal body ideals, obtain a masculine disposition, and to prove their competitiveness and competences in professional areas (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Broom &
In this analysis, I present how the sporty top managers create an idealized image by presenting a ‘role script’ based on the situational characteristics that they have ‘famed’. In the process of “scripting”, they constantly compare their appearance, behaviours and attitudes with those of a ‘real athlete’. They ‘script’ aesthetic ideals, behavioural rules and moral codes for their role as leaders based on athletic values. Moreover, the content of this script is also closely associated with the information they give about their health ideals and lifestyle approaches.

### 6.2.1 An idealized body image

Claiming that athletic values are indispensable in both private life and career development, the top managers present an imaginative image of themselves that is compatible with their beliefs in athletic values. This image contains wishful notions which the top managers would like to achieve in order to become a good leader.

The top managers delineate an aesthetic aspect of the idealized image of a good leader, which resembles the physique of athletes in endurance sports. This image is lean and muscular; it represents subtle competitiveness but not forceful physical aggression that is symbolized with, among other things, large muscle mass.

While outlining the aesthetic aspect of the image of an imaginative view of themselves as a good leader, the top managers constantly mention the importance of their appearance. That is, the physical presence of leaders is not only meaningful for themselves, but it is also the very source of inspiration, motivation and empowerment to others (both inside and outside the organizations they lead). For example, for Adam, a good leader, who appears active, fit and full of energy, will “inspire others in all aspects in life”.

“**Attractiveness**”

The top managers believe that being a leader means they need to inspire people. One of the most important aspects of such an inspiration is appearance. They claim that this image of the leader ought to be representative of their organizational culture. In this case, they believe they need to mould an image that represents athletic values at a time where there is a general trend in society and in the workplace around the notion of healthy living. In other words, the top managers believe they need to appear ‘attractive’ as leaders of their organizations so that people recognize that the organizational culture they represent is in line with socially acknowledged health values.
The idea of attractiveness occurs in several places in the top managers’ stories. The top managers interpret attractiveness and infuse athletic meanings in attractiveness in two ways. First, by mentioning attractiveness they refer to the aesthetic ideal and the beauty of their appearance. They use athletic aesthetic standards to define beauty and attractiveness of their own and others’ appearance. According to the top managers, an attractive appearance is one that is obviously fit, lithe, slender, and has well-defined muscle tone. This attractive surface image of themselves is regarded as representing heightened physical mastery and the necessary strength of a good leader. For example, Anna mentioned that she likes to “show off” her fit body just to convey a message to others that she lives an active lifestyle, and retains the self-disciplinary qualities of a ‘super woman’ which are required for the highly competitive situation in the industry. Martin likes to wear fashionable slim-fit suits which perfectly flatter his lithe, slender, well-defined body. He believes this makes the best first impress of others.

Turner states that successful people orchestrate fit, “successful” body-images, to present themselves and to enhance their values in life (1984). The top managers in this study imitate ‘real athletes’ not only in striving for an idealized state of physical mastery, but also in mimicking a look of ‘real athletes’ to express ‘enhanced’ values of themselves as leaders.

Second, the top managers mention the concept of ‘attractiveness’ to demonstrate their ability to make others interested in working with their organizations. Hence, this layer of the meaning of ‘attractiveness’ goes beyond personal attraction; but they link the image of themselves with the reputation and ‘attractiveness’ of their companies.

On this point, the top managers (especially Dan and Adam) highlight their responsibility to attract other people who hold similar athletic values to work with them. Both Adam and Dan emphasize the visible exterior of the body image as an important attribute of an ‘attractive’ leader. They believe that becoming an ‘attractive’ leader as such is beneficial in terms of building a corporate image, which may in turn attract active, physically capable people into their organizations. By expending the meaning of ‘attractiveness’ of an athletic body image these top managers also imply that a good corporate image contains major athletic values.

Size matters
The ‘beauty’ of the surface image of a good leader contains attributes such as size, weight and shape of the body. When talking about what a good leader ought to look like, the top managers repeatedly mention the right size, weight and form of the surface image. They merge athletic aesthetic values in the
‘script’ of an imaginative view of a good leader through emphasizing the meaning of the size of the body. For example, they often emphasize the importance of looking healthy. According to the top managers, an ideal healthy look is equivalent to an athletic and physically fit image. Looking healthy begins with looking right. The right size, weight and shape of the body comprise the ‘healthy look’ of an athletic leader.

When describing what they perceive as the perfect body image, the top managers often use assertive terms that distinguish between the “right” and “wrong” size of the body. The Body Mass Index was often used as a reliable measure in defining between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ size and shape of the body. Body Mass Index is a basic evaluative method. Unless it is used with other health evaluating measure, this index rarely gives a precise or countable indication of the healthiness of a person.

Following some popular notions, the top managers are inclined to judge that oversize and overweight bodies are a natural consequence of a sloppy lifestyle. Such bodies are regarded as irrelevant to the image of a leader. Anna explicitly states that she “cannot imagine a person who is overweight and occupies an important position in any organization”. According to Anna, a person who cannot control his/her own body is not to be trusted for making sound decisions for the organization and for others. Echoing Anna’s statement, Adam asserts, “Once you lose control of yourself, your body becomes less fit.”

Furthermore, the top managers are unanimous about the idea that the matter of size, weight and shape is not only crucial for an idealized image of a good leader, but it is also a serious matter for everyone. Aiming to lead by example, the top managers encourage their employees to work on a ‘proper’ body image just like themselves. For example, in Martin’s company, employees are allowed to substitute the gym fee for weight loss programmes (such as enrolling in Weight Watchers). In Anna’s company, people are encouraged to participate in the company’s internal weight-loss programme, which is inspired by the TV programme The Biggest Loser.

Moreover, the top managers also deliberately express attitudinal implications towards people who do not have the “right” shape. For example, both Anna and Adam say that recruitment, promotion and incentive processes ought to be linked to the BMI results. This way, according to Adam, people may be pressured to take measures to “shape up”. And for Anna, this is an effective measure which makes sure the company only recruits ‘super humans’.
The paradox of the ageing body

Youthfulness is regarded as another important aspect for a good leader. All the top managers in this research are men and women in their forties. This is the phase of life when people typically begin to become increasingly aware of their ageing process, because from this age the ageing process begins to indicate an unavoidable decline in physical strength (Faircloth, 2003). Yet, at the same time, the age between 40 and 55 is generally regarded as the golden period when people begin to harvest positive results from years of work and life experiences. Therefore, a general paradox remains in the social attitude towards ageing (Faircloth, 2003). In this study, I find that the top managers deal with the paradoxes of ageing by citing athletic values and by implementing athletic interventions to “solve” the “issue of ageing” both for themselves and for others.

On the one hand, the top managers believe that invaluable experience for a leader comes with ageing. On the other hand, they express concerns that a delineation of physical “top form” may come with this ageing process. In order to radiate vibrant energy while emphasizing their rich experience as a leader, the top managers rely on athletic endeavours to become younger in terms of physiological age by “reducing the factual age”.

For example, Martin constantly connects athletic values with the meanings of youth, vibrancy and power. He often addressed ageing as an issue. Yet he believes his athletic lifestyle not only makes him “feel young” but also reverses the factual ageing process. Martin claims that he manages to reduce his physiological age and enhance his physical capacities through working out regularly. Adam also likes to show off the improving results from his sporting races in order to demonstrate that “age is not a problem” for him as long as he is active and physically fit.

By constantly addressing ageing as an “issue” and athletic endeavours as a solution to such an issue, the top managers in this study express a view of life that contains the notion of “age fixation”. By presenting a physiological age that is younger than their factual age, and by urging others in the organization to commit to similar behaviours, they generally articulate appreciation and preferences for the “younger workforce”. At the same time, by constantly challenging a predominant view on the process of ageing through “reversing” their own ageing processes in athletic endeavours, they seek to present an imaginative image of themselves that is young, energetic, powerful and rich in experiences.
6.2.2 A disciplinary behavioural script

People tend to carry out behaviours that they believe presenting the idealized image of themselves (Goffman, 1959; 1963b). In this study, I find that when telling their stories, the top managers outline an idealized behavioural ‘script’, which is attuned to the situational characteristics.

The top managers define the institutional characteristics of the social environment by emphasizing athleticism, and by claiming their responsibilities as the self-disciplined role model in leading healthy organizations. Based on this assessment, they construct a compatible body image with athletic aesthetic values. In their verbal expressions, they also provide extensive descriptions of how they “ought to” behave so that they may live up to the imaginative view of a ‘good leader’. They frequently use linguistic features such as “have to”, “ought to” “should be” and “must” to outline a strict behavioural framework. By constantly talking about the importance of a healthy lifestyle, commenting on their exercise routines, and by expressing firm determination in adhering to these behavioural routines, the top managers make efforts to incorporate an athletic behavioural script into their imaginative views of a good leader.

In addition, when the top managers delineate a behavioural framework that is centred around athletic values, they emphasize two motivations. First, they stress that such a behavioural frame coincides with the expectations of others regarding what is a good leader. Second, they suggest that by following this behavioural ‘script’, they can become role models for others both in their private lives and at work.

The top managers give a detailed description of their lifestyle approaches and they cite this information to outline the behavioural rules for the imaginative view of a good leader. For example, when they explain how they maintain a healthy diet or how they manage exercise schedules, they often state that these behaviours are basic requisites that one would expect from a good leader.

Adam talks to his employees about his exercise routines in management meetings and at conferences. He gives detailed information about his daily exercise routines which normally involve either running or kayaking at five in the morning, two hours tennis after lunch, and ‘planking’ with his children in front of the TV in the evening. He also suggests that this is meant to set an example for others, too, by saying, “If I can do it, they can do it.” “They” refers to his employees. Adam believes that if everyone could do as he does - that is, cut the number of hours sitting in front of the TV, and instead go
exercising - they would all be able to be as fit and healthy as he is. This way, he becomes a good leader who influences others through being a role model.

Anna often proudly talks about cycling to work every morning. This 45-minute cycle route is part of her daily exercise schedule. “I have to do this; I need to take every opportunity to exercise,” Anna says. She believes that more employees have begun to cycle to work after seeing her bike parked outside the office. Dan claims that he strictly follows his exercise routine that consists of karate, running, exercising with personal trainers in the gym and cycling regularly. Although running is a new sport for him, in order to face the challenges from his peers who often participate in running races, he runs three times per week with his sporty personal assistant during lunch breaks. “I have to use the lunch breaks. There is no other chance for me do the running. Besides, I don’t really like it; I need someone to run with me, but I know I can set a good example for others . . . .”

According to the top managers, a controlled diet is an important aspect of a healthy lifestyle. They take every opportunity to comment on what they eat to demonstrate healthy characteristics of their lifestyle. When we meet for meetings at lunch restaurants, Mary and Dan like to make comments about the salad, or the organic food they normally order to show their disciplinary attitude in monitoring their daily diet. Moreover, the top managers also seek to influence others so that they could be as healthy as they are, too. Anna often asks her receptionist to order a salad for our lunch meetings. She believes even a minor detail as such may eventually make changes in her receptionist’s own choice of diet.

### 6.2.3 A moral guideline

In leadership, athletic qualities are not regarded as an indispensable part of a leader’s trait in a formal sense. I find that when interpreting their experience from athletic endeavours, the top managers seek to combine athletic values in their understanding of the imaginative view of an idealized occupant of the leadership role. As mentioned earlier, they attempt to prescribe athletic aesthetic values and athletic behavioural routines to such an imaginative image of a good leader. In this part of the analysis, I illustrate how they outline the moral codes of good leaders also by drawing on athletic values.

According to dramaturgical theories of self-presentation, when people try to present themselves as an ideal occupant of a social role and intend to infuse the idiosyncratic (e.g. the imaginative view of themselves based on personal interests) aspect into this role, they must face the constant jarring of reality (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1969). That is, people have to convince others that
any new nuances they seek to add to the imaginative view of themselves as occupants of a social role are recognizable as a valid quality for that role (McCall & Simmons, 1966). In this analysis, I find that the top managers attempt to legitimize the athletic values as valid qualities of a good leader by combining conventional moral codes of leaders with social implications of athleticism. This way, they infuse athletic values as legitimized qualities of the leadership role.

The top managers use value-laden expressions such as “right” and “wrong”, “correct” and “incorrect”, “normal” and “abnormal” to make assertive moral indications. To link their views on ‘health ideals’ and their own ‘lifestyle approaches’ with their judgement on ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ bodies and lifestyle. They thereby insist that fitness and health are individual responsibilities that reflect not only the daily life of a person, but also their moral stance. They contend that the overweight body, stress or even ailments may all be indications of moral failure. A toned, fit and athletic image mirrors self-disciplinary qualities, self-reliance and self-control. For example, Dan insists that the desired qualities of a leader typically involve clear judgements in making ‘correct’ choices both in life and for the organization. These ‘correct’ choices, according to Dan, are decisions that he has personally made in committing to athletic endeavours and in living a healthy life. As stated earlier, to Adam, an overweight body indicates lack of control. Hence, those who fail to make ‘correct’ decisions in their lives often appear to be unhealthy, unfit and unwell.

When talking about their efforts in daily exercise routines, the top managers suggest moral worthiness between the lines. For example, the top managers make a salient linkage between the “good appearance” of the “correct size, shape and weight” of the body with their judgements of the “good self”. This is in line with what Turner once argued (1987), namely that the moralist aspect of public health has evolved into an overwhelming concern with the surfaces of the body. “Looking good” or “looking athletic”, therefore, indicates not only “feeling good” but are also taken as powerful indicators of the goodness of a self-disciplined leader (e.g. Turner, 1987:24). Moreover, not only is the surface appearance given symbolic moral indications, but the top managers also suggest that efforts in cultivating the body – its size, shape, and appearance – imply one’s moral stance. They believe these detailed lifestyle behaviours in daily life directly reflect one’s disposition as the occupant of a social role he/she occupies.

The top managers assert that demonstrating the body image of an athlete obviously shows tremendous self-disciplinary qualities. They moralize an athletic body image through giving meanings to this image by claiming its positive effects in organizational processes. For example, Dan claims that his image that resembles a real runner makes a positive impression on others.
“When people see me, they see a strong leader who is persistent, competitive and self-disciplined, so they assume the company has good values, too,” says Dan. Adam claims that his efforts in athletic endeavours have helped him to convey cultural essences in his company which centre around ‘healthy’. By expressing the moral implications of athletic endeavours, and presenting himself as an athletic person, Adam believes people perceive him as a good leader who “walks the talk”.

This reveals that the top managers create an idealized image of themselves as leaders that is consistent with the situational characteristics they have asserted. Aiming to become a ‘super woman’, a transformational leader, a master of changes, choice and challenge, or the first female CEO who competes with her athletic male peers, the top managers use athletic values to create unified notions about how a good leader ought to look, behave and choose the moral stance. This way, they incorporate athletic values in the ‘script’ of an idealized image of a good leader.

The analysis further indicates that the understanding of self as the occupant of a social role is not isolated within individualized cognitive self-process. Rather, people outline an idealized image of self as occupant of a role through expressing the wishful notions that they see fit in a social situation. Meanwhile, the top managers also attempt to shape others’ understanding about the situation, too. This way, they seek to close the gap between ‘whom they want to be’ and ‘what has been required in a situation’. Hence, the formation of understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role is an individualized process that is situated in the interpretation of a social context. In this process, the top managers undergo a constant self-reflexive dialogue in which they negotiate an understanding of self that is both personally and socially meaningful.

6.3 Labelling others through “casting” supporting roles

Previous sections illustrate how the top managers in this study interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to convey their understanding of the situational characteristics, and how they give detailed delineation of an idealized image of themselves as the occupants of the leadership role who most fit the situation described.

The symbolic interactionist view on self explains that the self is inseparable from others (Denzin, 2004; Charon, 1989). We present ourselves in social life in certain ways so that this self-presentation is expressive of particular values and beliefs that encompass the characteristics of the situation. By assessing
the characteristics of the situation, we define ourselves and others in these situations (e.g. create dramatic personas) (Benford & Hunt, 1992). On this point, Goffman also contends that “when a performer guides his private activity in accordance with incorporated moral standards, he may associate these standards with a reference group of some kind, thus creating a non-present audience for his activity” (1959: 81). These notions indicate that people carry out self-presentational practices by responding to their beliefs about values held by others without their actual presence. At the same time, they may articulate important moral standards, values and beliefs that are vital to their own sense of self through labelling the ‘non-present’ others.

In this part of the analysis, I focus on analyzing how the top managers seek to present the self by bringing in their evaluations of relations with others. Others make impacts on our self-presentation mainly in two ways. When we present ourselves to others, we often imagine and interpret the evaluations others make of us. Hence, the process of self-presentation involves our self-reflexivity as responses to our imaginative evaluations by others (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 2004). At the same time, when we talk about ourselves, we tend to refer to imaginative others to assure our own sense of values and beliefs. That is, when we define ourselves, “we also attribute different identities to others” (Charon, 1989). Consequently, we give various identities to others based on the values and beliefs we hold.

From a dramaturgical perspective, people enter social interactions aiming to present themselves with the most adequate image to impress others. By either responding to imaginative evaluations others make of us or giving others diverse identities, we affirm the values upon which we build our own senses of self (Schlenker, 1980, 1985; Goffman, 1959). In other words, our self-esteem is partially dependent on our views on others, and our actions (reactions) towards others. In such circumstances, others serve as “supporting roles” for the social actor’s self-presentation (McCall & Simmons, 1962).

In this part of the analysis, I focus on examining how the top managers define and classify others and how they tend (willingly or unwillingly) to respond to others’ opinions of them. I anchor the analysis in their verbal expressions, especially value-laden expressions about others. I pay attention to how they talk about others in different ways and how they express different attitudes towards different others. I find that in the research process, the sporty top managers maintain a coherence ‘act’ when they interact with journalists, their co-workers or me. They seem to keep a firm belief that all ‘others’, either in presence or absent, share or ought to share the same value base about sport, fitness and health in which they personally believe.
This analysis finds that the description of others moves between being specific and abstractive depending on how the top managers consider the weight of others’ influences on them. They typically give voice and detailed descriptions of traits to some, and they mobilize these voices and traits to reinforce and enhance athletic values and beliefs. Based on different attitudes and descriptions the top managers express about the ‘important others, I find the top managers divide others into three major categories. These are: ‘life coaches’, who are athletic and typically retain authoritative social or institutional positions; ‘similar others’, who also use athletic approaches in many aspects in life; and ‘different others’, who are “unhealthy”, “unfit” and “sloppy”.

I find that the top managers not only articulate evidently distinctive attitudes towards different others, but they also give different functions to the ‘cast’. For example, they express an obvious respect for life coaches, and they allow life-coaches to exert influencing power to their own lives. They articulate overt appreciation of the similar peers, with which, they further confirm the legitimacy of athletic values. At the same time, they express disappointment when they describe the different others. Based on this, they claim the authority and express determination to change them, both inside and outside the workplace.

Life coaches

For the top managers, the life coaches are generally those people who have introduced the athletic lifestyle to them or those who have influenced their lives positively. In expressing overt respect and admiration for this category of people, they endorse life coaches to exert influencing power over their lives. The words of the life coaches are regarded as guidelines in the development of the top managers’ selves. These life coaches are typically their parents, older siblings, societal role models and their bosses at work.

The top managers regard their parents and older siblings as a major source of inspiration for their commitment to athletic endeavours during childhood. Later in adult life, the top managers begin to look up to societal role models or their bosses at work. They see them as role models who provide behavioural, moral and aesthetic guidance. Moreover, they also show great respect for those former professional athletes who currently provide services in training corporate executives (including themselves) in the business world.

For the sporty top managers, these ‘life coaches’ have introduced athletic values in their childhood (such as their parents and older siblings), or have strengthened their belief in an active, sporty lifestyle in their career development (such as their sporty bosses and the healthy former Prime
Minister). For example, Dan remembers his older brother as an idol who had greatly inspired him in his continuous sporting pursuits. They both played rugby when they were teenagers. Sadly, Dan’s brother died in the middle of a rugby match. The image of his late brother in his blue rugby blazer has forever been imprinted on Dan’s mind and become an eternal source of strength. Later on, Dan looked up to his boss who committed to sports in extreme ways.

Anna repeatedly turns to her boss, who used to be a professional swimmer, for good advice at work. For example, she followed his advice in hiring a candidate who also used to train as an elite swimmer. She embraced the comment from her boss in which he implied feminine appeals make major disadvantages for female managers. Anna takes this comment seriously so she is often conscious about her appearance at work.

Mary firmly believes that a person’s socio-political status defines the degree of influence they have. For her, people with social influence are those with a high socio-economic status, such as celebrities and successful business people, as well as politicians. Hence, these individuals naturally become her major source of inspiration. She sees them as life coaches in every respect. When the former Conservative Prime Minister talked about his preference for the ‘black box’ for a healthy diet, Mary immediately embraced that idea, too.

The life coaches are also those people who actually coach the top managers in their training and exercise routines. The top managers express their appreciation of and faith in former elite athletes who currently work as personal trainers for amateur athletes like themselves. In her newspaper column, Mary reports her progress in her preparation for the Iron Man competition. She expresses much admiration for and confidence in those well-known former elite athletes she works with. She trusts that she is in the good hands of these professionals, who she believes “know what they are doing”.

Adam claims that he never skips his two o’clock afternoon tennis class with a former elite tennis player …The top managers are certain that their coaches not only pass on prominent sporting prowess to them, but that they also help them to convert essential athletic spirits into leadership qualities.

Moreover, through giving detailed descriptions of their own life coaches, the top managers assume they themselves are playing a similar role. That is, they believe that important values are generally being passed on in society or in the organization in a cascade process, which is often initiated by people with superior socio-political status. By expressing such values and beliefs, they ensure their own position in instilling athletic values and upholding self-disciplinary principles in their respective organizations.
The similar others

While the top managers define life coaches as those who have provided guidance in choosing the “correct values” in their childhood and during their career development, they often mention another category of others. These people are able to compete with, stimulate and challenge them as the ‘similar others’. These similar others share the same values in terms of lifestyle with the top managers. They are fellow corporate executives who are members of the same sport clubs, colleagues at work or friends in their private circles. The top managers describe the similar others as people who are supportive of an athletic lifestyle, and they identify themselves with athletic values, too.

In addition, the top managers suggest that an effect of their role modelling might be to inspire and ‘transform’ some of these supportive others to become athletic and healthy. The similar others also include those people who have been recruited into the organizations based on lifestyle indicators such as their interests in sports. “Between two people who show a similar level of professional competence, I would hire the one who engages in sporting activities more often,” Adam once confirmed. Anna uses the same approach when she tries to include more similar others in her organization. Emphasizing the on-going tough competition in her industry, Anna seeks to include more “‘super humans’. She is also determined to transform more employees in her organization to become ‘super (physically and mentally) human’.

When describing the similar others, the top managers give them voices, names and traits as well as presenting more detailed descriptions of their attitudes and comments. The top managers tend to draw on these individuals’ stories as concrete evidence to verify the athletic values. At the same time, they express obvious appreciation of these individuals, both of their sporting prowess and their professional competences. Adam likes to spend time during coffee breaks time chatting with the “similar guys” in his company about the recent competitions in which they have participated. He does not deny that his relation with the similar others at work may affect his view of them in a professional sense. However, Adam justifies his obvious preference for sporty employees through his belief that athletic performances have positive indications for a person’s professional performance. He even jokes about incorporating competition results in the promotion and incentive programs.

The similar others are seen as source of motivation for new challenges. Several times in our interviews, Dan mentions his “competitive colleagues” who have (they are usually guys) challenged Dan in running races. Although Dan does not enjoy running, he claims that he appreciates such challenges, and believes these peers make him “improve” tremendously.
People generally choose to develop closer relationships with those whom they perceive to be similar to themselves (Tsui & O’Reilly, 1992; Byrne, 1971). The top managers identify themselves with the similar others in the workplace or in their private network. They are regarded as peers and sources of inspiration and motivation for further improvement. The top managers exercise with the similar others; they exchange embodied experiences in athletic endeavours; they discuss muscle aches, injuries, excitement and difficulties with each other. They see these experiences as a solid base upon which they build mutual understanding, empathy, compassion, and friendship. The top managers enact athletic values to evaluate and to express appreciation of people with whom they share common interests and passions in friendship. By defining ‘similar others’, the top managers reaffirm their belief and faith in athletic values.

The different others

Sometimes, people affirm values and beliefs which they use to lay the foundation for their senses of self by pointing out what “not to do” (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980, 1985). In this study, I find the top managers identify individuals who are ‘different’ to strengthen the value basis upon which they construct the understanding of self as the occupant of the leadership role. In this sense, the top managers strengthen the notions of ‘whom they want to become’ by explaining ‘who they are not’.

According to many top managers, the “different others” are those individuals who have not realized the importance of healthy living. They are typically referred to as the “unhealthy”, “sloppy” and “unfit” individuals. The different others are described as desperately in need of help; yet, they are often persistently resistant to any changes in their life and are therefore “left behind”. The different others belong to the blue (in need of help) and the red (unhealthy) categories in the health screening programs. They are often overweight, under-stimulated in doing sports, and have an unhealthy diet. According to the top managers, these different others have failed to make the “correct” choices in life.

Although the top managers give detailed descriptions of how the different others look and behave, they do not give a voice to them to express what type of help they might need, or whether they need (or want) help at all. Instead, the managers assume that these “unfit” and “unhealthy” individuals are in urgent need of “support and direction” either from professional health consultants or from the “positive” influences of the top managers. They are discontent and deviate from the healthy norms; they therefore ought to be ‘transformed.'
Out of good will, the top managers express a determination to make changes in the lives of the different others. For example, Adam believes that as a role model and by constantly stressing the healthy culture in the organization, he is able to change both the minds and behaviours of people. Mary believes that changing people may be a long process, yet she is determined that with her leadership, she will gradually be able to make changes in her “conservative” organization.

By positioning the different others diametrically opposite the healthy, fit and disciplined individuals, the top managers define behaviours that are not in line with the ‘healthy’ norms. They point out the ‘unfit’ and ‘abnormal’ lifestyle indications. This way, the top managers reinforce athletic values as the value basis of organizational culture and as the foundation on which they establish their sense of self as leaders.

In this study, the top managers talk about ‘others’ frequently when telling their stories of athletic endeavours. They include not only others from professional circles, but also from their private lives. Others that have ‘supported’ the self-presentation of top managers are their parents, friends, colleagues, and even societal celebrities who are regarded as powerfully influential. The top managers generally assume that most others (bosses, peers, friends, employees and even me, the researcher) share a universal understanding of athletic endeavours. Based on this belief, the top managers give different identities to different others to highlight and strengthen values that they hold personally.

Hence, ‘others’, being classified into different categories, like the cast on the stage, take on distinctive supporting roles in the self-presentation of the sporty top managers. This analysis also indicates that the occupants of the leadership role may be responsive to opinions of others who are not solely from the work setting in the formation of their understanding of self as leaders. They allow some people, both from within and outside the workplace to exert influencing power to themselves. They are responsive to comments and suggestions or authoritative assertions expressed by life coaches, whereas they use the voices of ‘similar peers’ and ‘different others’ to strengthen values they personally hold, and to reinforce their status and authority as leaders. While seeking to present the self with an idealized image, they actively choose to include and elevate some people in organizational processes, and to distance themselves from the ‘different others’.
Part II  Performing the imaginative view of self as an athletic leader

Performance is one of the most important concepts in the dramaturgical notion of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). For Goffman, “performance” refers to all the activity of an individual before a particular audience (1959: 22). Goffman also uses the label of ‘front’ to refer to the expressive “equipment” or strategies intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performances. To shape the ‘front’, people carry out particular ‘performances’ in “expressive control” to maintain coherence expressions about themselves, too (Goffman, 1959: 22-23).

In this thesis, as stated in the earlier chapter, I use the term ‘performances’ to refer to the manner in which people control expressive information about themselves. According to dramaturgical understanding of self-presentation, people strive to convey an idealized view of themselves (which matches the situational characteristics) to others. In this process, people enact performative strategies to remove the discrepancy between “who they are” and “whom they want to become” (Goffman, 1974). They control expressive information to avoid any informative cues that may damage their image in the “gaze” of imagined others (Goffman, 1959, 1974; Schlenker, 1980, 1985, 2012).

In the earlier section on analysis of verbal expressions, I find the top managers use verbal skills to ‘set the scene’ by instilling athletic values in their assessment of situational characteristics of social environment. They outline an idealized image of themselves in the ‘script’, and they position themselves by defining other interactants into different ‘supporting roles’. In these three dramaturgical episodes, the top managers infuse social interpretations of athletic values into their articulations of an imaginative view of themselves as self-disciplined, self-reliant, competitive and success-driving occupants of the leadership role. In other words, the analysis illustrates how the top managers, through interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours, “give” sufficient information about how they would like others to perceive them. In addition, the narrative illustration of the idealized image of an ‘athletic leader’ seems solely addressing the top managers “inner audience”. Although the top managers refer to ‘others’ constantly in their stories, they rarely mention the responses of the audiences but they assume and assert their needs and desires.
In Goffman’s view, the performer relies upon the expressive cues that a person gives out to others as a signal of something important about him or her. Yet, the performer may suspect the possibility of misunderstanding that a cue is designed to convey. In response to this self-conscious suspicion, performers commonly attempt to exert a kind of “expressive control” to assure the coherence of the over-all definition of the situation that is being fostered (Goffman, 1959).

In this part of the analysis, I study the “performances” of the top managers. I pay attention to ways in which the top managers control the expressive cues in self-presentation to avoid any discreditable information about themselves (e.g. Goffman, 1959). These ‘expressive cues’ refer to audible or visible sources of information such as clothing, expressions of emotion etc. Moreover, the analysis of performance is partially based on the top managers’ verbal expressions about different approaches they use in front of others. This analysis is also based on descriptive data from the observations.

Moreover, words and verbal expressions are used in the top managers’ life stories to articulate wishful notions about the visibility of bodies and to construct an imaginative view of themselves. However, living up to these wishful notions takes real actions and tireless work. I find that the top managers make great efforts to live up to the imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders. They express concerns and anxieties when they fear they are not able to close the discrepancy between “who they are” and “whom they want to become”. They use ‘performative expressions’ such as using clothing, adjusting their postures in photos, working on their bodies to appropriate an idealized image of an athletic leader. And they reformulate expressions of emotions, and give different connotations about bodily senses to avoid giving off any discreditable information about themselves. Nonetheless, similar to the other three dramaturgical episodes, in ‘performances’ the top managers never explicitly address the specific demands of audiences. Rather, they assume others have their gaze upon them, but they undergo expressive control mainly to satisfy their own “inner audience”.

McCall and Simmons (1962) suggest that when occupants of the social role create new elements (based on self-interests) in their understanding of selves, they make efforts to give legitimacy to the new elements so that people would recognize them as part of the identity attributes of the given social role. People normally accomplish this by merging the new elements in their understanding of self with some standing notions of that give social role. In this study, the sporty top managers use different expressive strategies to appropriate the imaginative view of themselves as ‘athletic leaders’. By doing this, they attempt to live up to their own creation of an image of an ‘athletic leader’ and
to give legitimacy to this image through merging this view with some prevailing leadership notions.

6.4 Appropriating an idealized image

‘Appearance’ may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer’s social statuses. These stimuli also tell us of the individual’s temporary ritual state, that is, whether he is engaging in formal social activity, work, or informal recreation, whether or not he is celebrating a new phase in the season cycle or in his life-cycle.

(Goffman, 1959: 24)

In the above quote, Goffman used “appearance” to refer to the surface visibility of people’s actions in the “front” with which they attempt to complete a successful self-presentation in social life (1959: 22). Yet, the literal meaning of the notion of “appearance” as the surface visibility of a person’s look has been discussed extensively, too. Charmaz and Rosenfeld (2006) elaborate the gratitude of the surface appearance in a person’s sense of self. They state that the visibility of the body “can tell about our past (i.e. scars) and our current habits (i.e. through the smell of cigarettes or alcohol) and activities (i.e. perspiration signals exercise, anxiety or guilt), even our futures, as people judge us on our physical appearances” (2006: 39). Within the same cultural context, people generally share a unitary judgment and a normative standard regarding what a physically capable body should look like (Turner, 1984). For example, successful people tend to orchestrate a toned, disciplined body to enhance personal values (Turner, 1984, 111). Hence, through body management, people express important values and beliefs that comprise the basis of their sense of self (Sassatelli, 2000).

In the “script”, I have illustrated how the top managers outline an idealized body image that resembles a real athlete when telling their stories. They address bodily factors such as size, weight, shape, clothing and age as crucial compositions of the idealized image of an athletic leader. In the analysis of performance, I find that the top managers enact performative strategies in body management. The body management concerns their actions and verbal expressions that are used to control the appearance, regulate the visibility of unwellness and femininity, and express meanings of the correct appearance of an athletic leader. The top managers modify expressive cues that they believe might lead to misconception or discreditable impressions of themselves. By
doing this, they try to live up to the imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders.

6.4.1 Decorating the body

One of the major concerns sporty top managers have involves the visibility of the surface appearance. According to Goffman, people tend to decorate and dress the body to express how they expect others to perceive them (e.g. Goffman, 1959). Furthermore, social studies employing dramaturgical perspectives have argued that the use of clothing is part of the ongoing process of the self-realization process, which reveals both unique and socially shared meanings (Gussak, 2008: 314). When presenting the self to others in daily life, people use clothing and other methods to ‘decorate’ their bodies to express the selfhood on many levels, such as articulating personal aesthetic values, demonstrating either conformity with or rejection to socially acknowledged norms, and negotiating gendered identity etc. (Gussak, 2008; Goffman, 1959).

In my study, I find that the sporty top managers choose to exercise, to dress up and groom themselves to mould their appearance in certain ways both to satisfy personal pleasures and to live up to an imaginative ‘proper look’ of an athletic leader. They shape and adjust the visibility of self by involving a high degree of knowledge about self, their understanding of the leadership role, and the situation for which they are dressing or creating the image. I observe that while trying to experience personal pleasure in striving for fitness or selecting clothing, the top managers would often describe ways of dressing up or decorating the body in order to create a positive image as leaders. For example, Anna talks about enjoying wearing feminine dresses on non-business occasions; yet she often tries to repress such personal pleasure at work, and chooses to appear ‘fit’, ‘powerful’ and ‘professional’ instead.

Furthermore, in my field notes, I describe the appearance of the top managers when they come to our meetings. I use the information in the section of “the first meeting” as the introduction to the stories of the top managers. The observational information shows that the top managers often arrive wearing a strict business look when our meetings take place in the office. Although their appearance does not directly portray the image of an athlete on these occasions, they choose to wear clothes that flatter their body, which, according to some of them, is the symbol of obvious efforts in athletic endeavours.

Moreover, previous studies indicate that women are more likely to use their choice of clothing as self-expression than men do. In my study, I find that both men and women are keen to mould an appropriate surface appearance to live up to the imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders. Yet they use
different approaches in this regard. For example, Martin emphasizes that how he dresses makes the most important first impression on others, before they get to know him. He makes overt efforts to make an ideal first impression by appearing well-dressed, fit and carefully groomed.

Anna expresses great concern about her appearance. She tries to use her style of dressing to express ‘whom she wants to become’ and to avoid being perceived as ‘whom she does not want to become’. She says she spends a long time considering what to wear every morning. On the one hand, she likes to show off her toned, athletic body; on the other hand, she does not want to reveal ‘disadvantageous’ feminine appeal.

Furthermore, to avoid being perceived as “too womanly”, Anna wears high-heels, long trousers and a black V-neck sweater as her signature power dress. The selection of this clothing is partially based on her personal interest, and yet, according to Anna, it is intended more to serve an instrumental function of dressing ‘appropriately’ both as a woman and as a leader. The interesting part is that high-heel shoes are typically regarded as a symbol of ‘sexiness’ in a woman. Yet by hiding them under long trousers, Anna claims she uses them as a token of a discrete feminine expression of her powerful status as a leader. With these heels, Anna claims that she is able to stand tall and look over everyone’s heads when she gives a talk in the meeting room.

Moreover, the top managers use the surface appearance of the body as self-expressions as if it were a set of “props” facilitating their “stage acts” as athletic leaders. I observed several occasions when the top managers worked with photographers to strike poses that they believe convey the ‘right’ messages about them as leaders. On many of these occasions, the top managers were asked to pose like real athletes. For example, in the CEO Duel competitions, Adam and his challengers worked with the photographer from a business publication after each match or race. The photographer often spritzed water on their bodies to simulate sweat running down; and he directed their postures, facial expressions, or gestures so they were expressive of strength, power and aggression. Adam is collaborative in these ‘image creating’ moments. He likes to be portrayed as a ‘real athlete’.

Furthermore, the sporty top managers are often asked to pose in training clothes by reporters and journalists from the business press. In these pictures, the top managers are not in their usual business outfit. They are often asked to assimilate running or stretching movements. The top managers seem to enjoy presenting the athletic side of themselves in media. They willingly collaborate with the media to project an image of themselves as the ‘athletic leaders’. They use their bodies to convey their understanding of themselves as the occupant of the leadership role which is infused with social meanings of athletic values.
The top managers believe that the perfect look of an athletic leader is a lithe, slender, muscular physique decorated with a professional outfit. This ‘decorated’ body image is intended to convey enhanced athletic values, competitiveness, self-disciplinary qualities and the elitist status of a leader. They enact verbal expressions to give meanings to their appearance, and they use expressive performances to appropriate their looks. They do this to facilitate the realization of athletic aesthetic values and leadership values, such as self-disciplinary strengths and masculine qualities.

### 6.4.2 Adjusting a gendered image

Social studies on athleticism have indicated that both women and men use their experiences in athletic endeavours to negotiate a gendered image of self (Crawford, 1995; Courtenay, 2009; Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). In my study, I find that both female and male top managers make great efforts to ‘appear appropriately’ as leaders. As mentioned previously, female and male top managers in my study use different approaches to create a positive image through ‘decorating their bodies’. In addition to the surface appearance, ‘performing’ the idealized image of an athletic leader also involves integrating the image of a ‘real athlete’ with the image of a good leader. I find that female and male managers in this study negotiate and present an idealized image as athletic leaders using different approaches.

#### Controlling femininity

In this study, I find both female and male top managers use the interpretation of their experiences in athletic endeavours as an efficient measure to appropriate masculine qualities in different ways. The top managers mainly enact two types of verbal expressions and expressive performances to address their athletic endeavours. They express two themes of self-expressions: they are “whom I want to become” and “whom I do not want to become”. They reformulate their expressions when telling stories about their experiences in athletic endeavours to avoid being perceived as ‘whom they do not want to become’.

As mentioned earlier in “setting the scene”, the female top managers co-construct an impression of the social situation where they use athletic values to convey masculine characteristics - such as desire for success, competitiveness, self-reliance etc. - as desired qualities of people at work and of leaders. In my observation, I find that the two female top managers experience severe bewilderment and conflict when they try to adhere to the imaginative view of themselves they have co-authored together with male peers.
In the previous sub-section, I talked about how Anna expresses obvious concerns about the “disadvantageous” feminine appeal at work. Yet the two female top managers regard the stereotypical feminine characteristics as a disadvantage for their role as leaders at work not only from the aspect of the surface appearance. Previous research indicates that women report that their bodies are problematic signifiers at workplaces more often than men do, especially in leadership positions in which women feel that they have to work to manage the signifying effects of their bodies in an “appropriate” way (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000).

When observing their behaviours and actions, I find that the two female top managers tend to problematize stereotypical femininity more extensively. At the same time, by infusing social meanings of athletic values to interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours, the two female top managers attempt to convince themselves and others that they are becoming “equally good” leaders as their male peers. Hence, they “perform” the imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders through controlling the impression of stereotypical femininity, which mainly indicates motherliness, calm, caring etc. (e.g. Eagly & Karau 2002).

According to Anna and Mary, the first disadvantage of being a woman and a leader is the conflict between the different roles they occupy. Both Anna and Mary believe being a wife and a mother “interferes” with their pursuit of a successful career. They were never able to do all the activities that are requisites for the leadership position, and that their male peers did, when they were married. Now both Anna and Mary are divorced. According to them, an ‘unsuccessful’ marriage is the price a woman who wants to succeed in her career has to pay.

In this study, Anna and Mary often talk about the advantages of being a divorcee. They are now able to spend as much time on sports as their male peers normally do. Anna started to go to gym more often after her divorce. Mary began to train with male executives to prepare for the Iron Man Race and she participated in training sessions with the male-only CC1000 team for Vasaloppet. “Most of the successful women that I know are divorced,” Mary once told me, “because as a single woman, we are free from our responsibilities at home and can finally compete with men on an equal footing.”

Like the male top managers, Mary and Anna often draw on athletic values to convince themselves to stay strong and persistent. They tend to prioritize their role as leaders when they face antagonistic emotions and identity bewilderment as women in leadership positions. For example, Anna
complains that her male peers are not very considerate of her role as a mother of two teenagers. Her colleagues often book meetings and travel schedules in her diary. Yet she would sigh and say, “Well, I should not complain. This is what the job takes. I need to prioritize my work.”

The second ‘disadvantage’ of being a woman in a leadership position, according to Mary, is the lack of interest in competition and in quantifying results of performances. Mary believes that a woman is typically more interested in the process of doing something. However, being a leader is all about outcomes and results. Having a competitive instinct and keeping statistics of results of performances is the “name of the game” in leadership. Hence, according to Mary, women do not naturally become good leaders.

In order to become a better leader, Mary confronts the ‘disadvantage’ of her feminine nature by engaging in athletic endeavours. Mary actively participates in the male only executive sporting clubs to ‘dilute’ her stereotypical femininity. She has begun to use electronic gadgets to keep track of the results of her sporting performance. She has learnt particular terminologies and slang expressions about certain sporting activities from the men. This way, Mary “feels as if she [I] were one of the guys” as she exercises as the only woman with other male executives. She enjoys sweating, falling, struggling and fixing her skis together with her male peers when cross-country skiing. She feels that when doing sports with “guys” in the same place, she is able to compete with them, or at least she has a chance to be “as good as the guys”. “For sure I cannot behave like a girly girl when I am doing sports with these tough guys,” Mary says. “To compete with guys you need to at least behave like one.” Being able to present her physical capacity in the same competition site with “guys” makes Mary feel empowered; she feels as if she is able to compete on an equal footing with men as one of the few female leaders in the male-dominated world of executives.

My study shows that the two female top managers, Anna and Mary, embrace the notion that a “correct” professional image of a leader does not always align with a stereotypical feminine image. They are highly self-critical when talking about their own gender identity when referring to their sense of self as leaders. The stereotypical feminine characteristics such as softness, calmness, motherliness and being considerate are important and necessary in social life, but they prevent a woman from ascending in organizational hierarchies (Heilman, 2001).

Based on these thoughts, Anna and Mary believe that a feminine image could weaken their persuasiveness and legitimate status as leaders. They both embrace the view that men have a natural advantage in leadership positions typically based on their competitive instinct and result-oriented
characteristics. Consequently, Anna and Mary rely on athletic endeavours to acquire similar qualities that their male peers possess naturally and to dilute, or even to erase, their feminine appeal.

Nonetheless, I find that while presenting themselves through conveying athletic values that emphasize self-control, self-reliance, competitiveness and even aggression, the two female top managers struggle constantly with thoughts about whether to acknowledge their feminine side of the self or to conform to the dominant masculine norms. They express anxieties either way. For example, Anna feels she is not being a good mother, since she travels frequently for work and spends too little time with her children. At the same time, she fears her male peers may question the legitimacy of her leadership if she expresses her desire to spend more time with her children. Therefore, the two female top managers face the challenge of being judged for lacking both the conventional characteristics of a woman, and stereotypical masculine qualities as a leader.

Athletic initiatives in *body management* may have made Anna and Mary feel that they have greater recognition and respect amongst male peers. However, I find that they do not substantially challenge the dominant masculine values. Rather, by mimicking their male peers in athletic endeavours and moulding a similar type of physique, these female managers uphold the very essence of masculine values. Acknowledging the ‘intrinsic weakness’ as women in top positions, and making great efforts to ‘shape-up’ their appearance, behaviours and attitudes to conform to the masculine norm through body management, the female top managers intensify masculine features in their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role.

**Regulating masculinity**

While the female top managers rely on athletic endeavours to control informative cues of femininity in the self-presentation, in my observation, I find that men are not free from “struggles” either. Although men generally tend to express hegemonic masculinity more openly through public actions such as speech, physical appearance and relations with others, they also tend to negotiate and regulate the sign of masculinity in a particular context (Messerschmidt, 1993: 83; Courtenay, 2009). Men enact their actions in lifestyle activities to give different content in the notion of masculinity in different social contexts (Courtenay, 2009). For example, working-class men tend to embody the type of masculinity that signals aggression through building massive muscle mass in boxing and body-building, whereas a rural boy is more likely to be out driving a tractor in order to show the prototypical manhood of a future farmer (Courtenay, 2009: 22). In this study, I find that the male top managers regulate a specific form of masculinity through their
athletic engagement; they express unique masculine values through managing their bodies in athletic endeavours.

For the male top managers in this study, gender has never been deliberately addressed as an issue. Rather, masculine characteristics such as power, status, self-control and competitiveness, an endless striving for success, and aggression are taken for granted as natural requisites for a leader. Yet I find that the male top managers in this study constantly make efforts to regulate a particular type of masculine characteristics by relating to their athletic endeavours in a leadership situation. For example, large muscle mass or a physique that resembles a body-builder is not generally accepted as an ideal image of an athletic leader. Sporting activities such as rugby, football or ice hockey are not regarded as the most prototypical sports that reflect the very strength of athletic leaders, either. Rather, the lithe, muscular and slender look which is typically a result of endurance sports such as long-distance running, skiing and swimming, is the idealized image that represents the ‘correct’ masculine qualities of an athletic leader.

I find that the male top managers make constant efforts to maintain this specific type of masculine image through maintaining the ‘correct shape’ in their body management. They fear that any signal of the wrong type of masculine indications may convey inappropriate information about themselves as leaders. For example, as mentioned earlier, Dan has modified his body from the image of a typical rugby player to that of a lithe and slender runner. This body image is regarded as expressive of the idealized qualities of an athletic leader who is physically and mentally enduring, competitive when making business strategies and successful in economic achievements (Sassatelli, 2000).

Moreover, previous research indicates that men generally tend to invoke health behaviours such as the exposure of injury or denial of unwellness to demonstrate masculinity (Courtenay, 2009). In this study, I find that on the one hand, the male top managers prefer to flesh out their injury and pain from athletic endeavours. They openly talk about physical ‘vulnerabilities’ such as muscle pain or injuries to highlight their strong commitment and persistence in athletic activities. By revealing their injuries, they try to project themselves as the leader who is able to discover a weak spot in themselves and continuously brings the self to a better state. On the other hand, the top managers tend to avoid talking about physical ailments or try to hide any gesture of stress-related physical and mental unwellness. Adam leaves the issue of ‘stress’ and ‘sickness’ in the hands of the in-house Health Manager. This way, the male top managers ‘perform’ the masculine features of the athletic leader, which solely promote self-disciplinary ideals such as persistency, the desire to win and for success, and competitiveness.
Like their female peers, the male top managers in this study rely on athletic endeavours to adjust their expressions of a particular type of masculine qualities of athletic leaders in body management. The male top managers rarely express this process of regulating athletic masculinity as a “struggle” or convey any obvious signal of identity bewilderment. However, I find that the male top managers are equally conscious about the information they convey to others that concerns their image as a leader.

6.5 Disciplining emotions and bodily senses

The expressive coherence that is required in performances points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs.

(Goffman, 1959: 56)

In Goffman’s view, people constantly discipline, control and modify their self-expressions in order to maintain a coherent image of self in social life (Scheff, 2005; Scheff, 2006). In this process, people work on controlling not only straightforward informational cues such as creating plots about their experiences in life, moulding appearances, carrying out postures and gestures, but they also attempt to discipline expressions of emotions and bodily senses which are the basic components of the “all-too-human” selves.

Emotions and somatic senses are expressive features of a person’s selfhood. People engineer social values into certain types of psychiatric states, from which they produce and present the self (Rose, 2003: 59; Goffman, 1959; Scheff, 2005). In other words, people generally seek to shape the expressions of emotions and somatic senses by infusing them with socially acknowledgeable meanings in order to construct the image of themselves that ‘fits’ a particular social context (Rose, 2003).

In this analysis, I detect salient ‘traces’ where the top managers make efforts to control and give meanings to expressions of emotions and bodily senses. I find that the top managers in this study give different meanings to natural somatic senses in athletic endeavours to facilitate the manifestation of their understanding of self as athletic leaders through linking somatic feelings with prevailing leadership values. Furthermore, they adjust and re-formulate
expressions of emotions to adhere to a ‘heroic’ image of the athletic leader through rationalizing their expressions of emotions with leadership notions.

6.5.1 Giving meanings to somatic senses: “Sweat is weakness leaving the body”

From a neurochemical perspective, people may experience pleasant feelings which are the consequence of increasing the secretion of “pleasure chemicals” such as dopamine and serotonin after an intensive workout. In social life, somatic feelings of empowerment and fulfilment are open to different interpretations (Rose, 2003). Infusing particular social meanings into somatic senses and emotions is a way people present the somatic aspect of self in a social situation where these social meanings are vital (Rose, 2003; Schlenker, 1985).

In this study, I observe that the top managers ‘perform’ the imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders by using work-related demands to explain their somatic senses in athletic endeavours. To accomplish this, they give creative meanings to somatic senses. Adam likes to wear a training top with Adidas’ slogan that says, “Sweat is weakness leaving the body.” This slogan vividly reflects the creativity displayed by the sporty top managers when they give meanings to their bodily senses and somatic feelings. As if they see “sweat” and “pain” as weakness leaving the body, the sporty top managers give other bodily feelings and somatic sensations various connotations and meanings while they present themselves as ‘athletic leaders’.

When I talked to the five sporty top managers, they all, to different extent link how they feel in terms of somatic senses when doing sport or working out in gym with work-related notions. For example, they keen to describe the ‘the post-workout somatic experiences, the pleasant’ sensation as the “great feelings” that one obtain in the sense of empowerment and fulfilment at work. Furthermore, they inscribe overt positive connotations to natural neurochemical reactions of the body. They describe the post-workout aches, pains and even injuries as indicators of self-enhancement which serve as a great topic in a casual chat between the top managers and their ‘similar peers’.

Nonetheless, while giving positive connotations to some bodily senses, the top managers show great reluctance to talk about sickness, stress-related unwellness and ailments. Martin, for example, takes any complaints about physical unwellness as “nagging”. In Martin’s view, such talk only leads to negativity and distractive effects. Adam suggests that people should turn to health professionals for the treatment of headaches, stress and other stress-related physical symptoms. In Adam’s company, there is a Department of
Health Management where stress-related health problems and ailments are expected to be taken care of by the professionals behind closed doors.

When telling stories about their experiences in athletic endeavours and stating distinctive implications about different somatic senses in this way, the sporty top managers outline and try to live up to an idealized neurochemical aspect of the self as athletic leader. They use the ‘athletic’ bodily senses to create new self-meanings that only demonstrate vibrancy, energy, competitiveness and positivity. At the same time, they inscribe such characteristics as one important attribute of the self as occupants of the leadership role.

6.5.2 Reformulating expressions of emotion

Emotion is another important expressive aspect of the self (Goffman, 1959; Scheff, 2005; Scheff, 2006). People tend to control expressions of their emotions or give particular meanings to some emotional expressions in order to present the self in ways they want others to perceive them. In this study, the top managers generally restrain expressions of private emotions to demonstrate professionalism as leaders in the workplace. Yet I observe that when they occasionally release true emotions, they re-formulate such expressions of emotions immediately by purposefully giving leadership meanings to these expressions. This way, the top managers maintain a coherent impression of themselves as athletic leaders who are capable of controlling all aspects of their body.

I find that the top managers re-formulate their expressions of emotions which they regard as spontaneous or impulsive, and those which they believe potentially reveal a vulnerable side of them. Adam tells me that he talked about his distress and anxieties with his colleagues during his divorce, mainly because he needed someone to listen to him in this stressful and depressing situation. Anna also expressed her distress and sadness to her colleagues during her divorce. Releasing private emotions is generally regarded as unprofessional in the workplace (Hochschild, 1979). Adam and Anna rationalized their spontaneously released emotional vulnerability through re-formulating these emotional expressions in two ways.

First, they interpreted their expressions of emotions as an instrumental act as leaders. Adam and Anna claim that their employees respect the fact that they have opened up with their feelings and emotions. “They think I am one of them, not just this athletic ‘super woman’ whose life seemed so perfect,” says Anna. Adam also claims the exposure of his ‘other side’ is a positive move for a leader, because, according to him, the exposure of his vulnerability brings him “closer to the employees”.

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Second, they rationalize their acts in releasing private emotions as a way of demonstrating that they deal with life obstacles and failures like real athletes. Adam claims that revealing the failures in his private life and showing how he bounces back is a way of showing the extraordinary strength he gains from doing sports; that is, the ability to cope and deal with failures and obstacles in life.

Adam and Anna claim that freeing their emotions has shown the ‘soft side’ of the image of ‘tough athletes’. This other side of the self contains sensitivity, caring and even vulnerabilities that are normally kept out of sight in a person’s self-presentation in public (e.g. Goffman, 1959: 141-142). Yet, after they re-formulate their expressions of the “impulsive” emotions, this act becomes instrumental and purposive in terms of maintaining the coherence of the idealized image of an athletic leader.

Moreover, the sporty top managers use emotional expressions in other instrumental manners, too. For example, being an extrovert person, Adam is normally very expressive of his emotions. He likes to give his employees a hug to show his affective and caring emotions. I observed that he gave a firm hug to anyone who passed by when we sat in the lobby in his office for our meetings. He hugged 1,200 employees upon their arrival at reception at the company’s 50th anniversary celebration. When talking about emotional expressiveness as such, Adam claims he is trying to transmit his strength and his enthusiasm to employees by releasing his emotions through hugging them. For Adam this act is not due to his personality, but it is his approach as a leader. He rationalizes this emotional attribute as part of his identity as a leader.

Through observing the ways in which the top managers express their emotions and feelings, I find that while attempting to maintain a stable emotional aspect of the self in the self-presentation as athletic leaders, they often encounter ambiguities. They struggle with how far they ought to reveal their personal emotions. They constrain and free the expression of their emotions spontaneously at times like any ordinary individual. Based on concerns regarding giving out discreditable information about themselves, they tend to re-formulate expressions of their emotions by linking them to instrumental leadership purposes. In this way, they seek to maintain the coherence of their image as athletic leaders.

The top managers readily make conscious efforts to repair what they perceive as projecting undesired informative cues to their image as athletic leaders (e.g. Miller, 1986; Miller & Leary, 1992). These business leaders constantly manage the information of selves to live up to the desired image of themselves.
as athletic leaders. The “expressive control” seems to be an ongoing process of self-interrogation which shifts between spontaneity and rationality (e.g. Goffman, 1959). The analysis of performances shows that the top managers are like performers on the stage who strive to present themselves as the idealized occupants of the role that fits the definition of the stage setting. In order to achieve a successful self-presentation, they use creative narratives and expressive performances to modify “who they are” and to perform “whom they want to be (seen as)” (e.g. Goffman, 1959: 25).

6.6 Summary of this chapter

This two-fold analysis illustrates the process in which the top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to convey their understanding of themselves as occupants of the leadership role. Athletic values and meanings of athleticism become interwoven in the top managers’ self-narratives, with which they outline an imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders.

The dramaturgical analysis of self-presentation shows that the top managers make new self-meanings as occupants of the leadership role through four dramaturgical episodes. As performers on a stage, they use self-presentational skills including narrative and other expressive strategies to construct an idealized image of themselves as the occupants of the leadership role, and they adhere to this image by eliminating discreditable cues.

Furthermore, this analysis also shows that new self-meanings that are derived from top managers’ interpretation of experiences in athletic endeavours are not only about the self. Rather, they contain elements that provide important indications about the understanding of the social (leadership) situation, about how a good leader ought to be (and behave) in such a situation, about the classification of others based on personally held values, as well as prevailing leadership values that are upheld and strengthened. The top managers integrate the meaning-making process in all four dramaturgical episodes to create an imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders.

The dramaturgical analysis finds that the self-presentation of athletic leaders is hence a creative process. Instead of making an ‘objective assessment’ of the situational characteristics, the top managers use personally held athletic values to assert the situational (leadership) context. They define situational norms around meanings of athleticism. They claim that athleticism is an indispensable attribute in their life and work and the source of knowledge in
social learning; they assert that athleticism creates a self-disciplined person and a leader with masculine qualities.

Furthermore, when the top managers define the situational characteristics, they also articulate their views on the situational rules. They define the notion of ‘becoming healthy’ as the general rule in the workplace. They emphasize their roles in influencing the lives of others in these ‘healthy’ organizations by articulating the intention of incorporating athletic values in organizational processes. Finally, they also claim an elitist status by emphasizing the ‘exclusiveness’ of their membership in executive-only sport clubs.

Based on this “scene”, the top managers give a thorough description of behavioural directions, aesthetic values and moral codes all based on personally held athletic values. By doing so, they add the athleticism framework as a new attribute of the imaginative view of a ‘good leader’. Using this framework, they classify others into different ‘supporting roles’, with which the top managers reinforce and strengthen athletic believes and values.

Finally, the dramaturgical analysis explains that the top managers’ self-presentation is not only a linguistic process, but it also involves expressive performances both in verbal and other performative expressive forms. The analysis of the performances in ‘expressive control’ shows that the top managers strive to live up to the athletic image through appropriating the image by decorating the body, adjusting a gendered (masculine) image, and through disciplining emotions and giving meanings to bodily senses. At the same time, they merge self-disciplinary values and masculine beliefs with the creation of the image of an ‘athletic leader’. Performing the imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders through highlighting and strengthening some prevailing leadership notions, the sporty top managers not only maintain a coherent image of themselves, but they also legitimize their individualized stories in athletic endeavours as a socially recognisable route of ‘becoming athletic leaders’ (Stryker, 1968; McCall & Simmons, 1962).
7. Becoming athletic leaders

Aiming at unpacking the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours in athletic endeavours and the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role, this study scrutinizes how a group of sporty top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to convey values, beliefs and concerns that are vital for their understanding of self as leaders. This study holds two theoretical assumptions about the phenomenon of athletic leaders. First, the study acknowledges that leaders, like all social actors, are meaning-agents, who are capable of creating new self-meanings as the occupant of a social role through interpreting their experience in particular behaviours (Denzin, 1992; Stryker & Statham, 1966; McCall & Simmons, 1966). Second, this study embraces existing social interpretations on the notion of athleticism and views lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours are self-expressive behaviours, with which social actors create and convey their understanding of self to others (Kuhn, 2006; Keane, 2009; Lee & Cockman, 1995).

Based on the aforementioned assumptions, applying theories of self-presentation with a dramaturgical approach, this study anchors its analysis in the self-presentational practices of five sporty top managers. The dramaturgical analysis scrutinizes the presentational self-expressions in stories of five top managers’ that concern situational characteristics, their description of an idealized self-image in that situation, their relations with others, as well as performative expressive strategies in four dramaturgical episodes in a self-presentation process.

The analysis provides an interpretive illustration on how the top managers constantly make sense of the experiences in particular types of behaviours (e.g. in lifestyle behaviours, in athletic endeavours) and how they incorporate these meanings to define social encounters and to situate an idealized image of athletic leaders in such social encounters. It shows that within four dramaturgical episodes of the self-presentation, the occupants of the leadership role are creative in terms of generating new nuances of self-meanings. The analysis therefore sheds light on understanding the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours, such as athletic endeavours, and their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role mainly in the following ways.
First, this study finds that the five sporty top managers actively use their lifestyle approaches such as athletic endeavours to create new narratives about themselves as ‘good leaders’. The top managers create distinctive stories about their experiences in athletic endeavours by merging the social interpretation of sporting activities, athleticism with their personal aspirations of becoming a ‘good leader’. Although the creation of new nuances of understanding of a leadership role contains divergent personal attributes, the analysis shows that these personal features become “grounded” in socially acknowledged leadership notions that indicate the quality of a ‘good leader’, mainly represented by enhanced self-disciplines and masculine qualities. Interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours and linking the interpretation with their views of the leadership role, the top managers each present unique characteristics as good leaders; and by using similar retrospective narrative techniques and meaning aligning ‘plotting’ skills, they situate the divergent, individualized self-stories in a unified imaginative view of self as athletic leaders.

This finding indicates that lifestyle behaviours such as athletic endeavours have become a ‘prime site’ where occupants of the leadership role create new self-meanings as leaders by situating personal values, individual aspirations in the understanding of the leadership role. Hence, the formation of the sense of self as leaders is both self-relevant and socially meaningful.

Second, the analysis shows that the sporty top managers’ self-expressions that emerge from self-reflexive activities in informal behaviours contain creative and novel content regarding their senses of self as leaders. Findings from this study show that the top managers add new self-meanings - including masculine aesthetic values, regulated emotions and bodily senses, a highly disciplined lifestyle, athletic moral indications, as well as athleticism as a symbol of a new form of the elitist status - all as indicators of their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role. Differing from a conventional view of a ‘good leader’, these new self-meanings do not directly address top managers’ professional competences, instead, they place emphases on the physical mastery, body image, moral stance, embodied experiences and lifestyle routines of the occupants of the leadership role.

Hence, occupants of the leadership role are creative in generating new elements in the understanding of self as leaders in lifestyle behaviours (athletic endeavours) which are deviating from the conventional leadership notions. This finding indicates that, leaders do not only form their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role through interpreting operational or managerial behaviours in the workplace; but they also tend to enact their experiences in other aspects in the ‘lifeworld’ to create new meanings and to outline new wishful notions as occupant of the leadership role. Moreover, by
creating new self-meanings from lifestyle behaviours, occupants of the leadership role potentially help to forge new ‘meaning-frames’ which may come to regulate their own behaviours not only at the workplace but also in private life (e.g. Mead, 1934; Denzin, 2004).

Third, this study finds that the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role involves both linguistic features and other forms of expressive performances. The sporty top managers not only create the imaginative view of themselves through generating new narratives about their understanding of the role, but they also perform the imaginative view of self as athletic leaders by enacting various expressive strategies in ‘expressive control’ (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Down & Reveley, 2009). That is, seeking to accomplish a successful self-presentation, the sporty top managers actively adjust their utterances and actions through “appropriating an idealized image”, “disciplining emotions” and “giving meanings to bodily senses”.

The expressive performances in “expressive control” thus serve two purposes in a ‘successful’ self-presentation (e.g. Goffman, 1959). First, they help to keep coherence expressions of the idealized view of athletic leaders and eliminate any discreditable informational cues that may distort this idealized view. Second, through expressive control the top managers merge prevailing leadership notions such as self-disciplinary values and masculine beliefs with the idealized image of athletic leaders in self-presentational expressions. By doing so, the sporty top managers also give leadership legitimacy and an elitist status to the creation of the idealized view of self as ‘athletic leaders’ (e.g. Goffman, 1959; McCall & Simmons, 1962).

Moreover, dramaturgical theories construe people’s self-presentation as an integrated approach that contains people’s evaluation of the situation, self and others (Schlenker, 1980, 1985). By including a broad range of information in the analysis of self-presentational practices, the dramaturgical analysis shows that the formation of the sense of self of the sporty top managers involves meaning-creation in all four dramaturgical episodes. When the top managers create self-meanings through interpreting their experiences of particular lifestyle behaviours they simultaneously articulate their understanding of the social environment in which they are situated; they express judgements of other people; they define an idealized view of self; and they indirectly reinforce some prevailing leadership notions in expressive control. Each dramaturgical episode thus serves its own purpose in the self-presentation. Although they all contribute to the creation of a coherent self-image of an athletic leader, these four dramaturgical episodes are meaning-inducing in their own right.
The abovementioned findings suggest that the process in which the sporty top managers form their sense of selves as idealized occupants of the leadership role is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful. This is to say that when people present themselves to others, they do not only achieve to induce others’ impression of themselves. Rather, this self-presentation simultaneously expresses the top managers’ intentions to mould others’ interpretation of important social norms, social rules that are valid in a social (organizational) situation, the understanding of the role of a leader in such a situation, as well as their evaluations about others etc. The self-presentation illustrated this way therefore contains information that is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful (Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012).

Furthermore, in an interpretive study, the meaningful expressions can only be understood profoundly through the researcher’s acknowledgement of “who is speaking, and under what circumstances” (Bakhtin, 1981: 340). Leaders are important actors in an asymmetrical power relation with others both in organizations and in social life (Domhoff & Dye, 1987). In this chapter, I discuss findings from the dramaturgical analysis of five sporty top managers’ self-presentation by allocating the findings in the context of ‘who they are’. That is, by “bracketing” leaders’ unique position in organizations, I thoroughly discuss the ‘meaningfulness’ of the top managers’ self-presentation in athletic endeavours on personal, interpersonal and organizational dimensions.

7.1 Giving symbolic meanings to the image of an athletic leader

In social life, self-presentation is never isolated from individuals’ social surroundings (Goffman, 1959). People construct the senses of self by balancing the aspect of their intrinsic sense of self and socially defined aspect of self depending on the level of significance of the social role in a situation (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980, 1985; Stryker, 1980). People seek to convey an understanding of self to others in order to influence others’ impression of them, and to ‘fit’ in a social situation (Schlenker, 1980; Goffman, 1959). Yet the self-presentation is also personally meaningful.

Findings show that the top managers in this study create an imaginative view of themselves by interpreting their experiences in athletic endeavours and by living up to wishful notions of self through controlling expressive information about themselves. Using verbal techniques such as retrospection and meaning alignment, the top managers enact social meanings of athleticism as the
“schemata of interpretation” (Goffman, 1974). They thereby combine the qualities of an athlete with those of a leader by “scripting” an idealized role image with athletic values; and through ‘performing’ this ‘script’ in “appropriating an idealized image of an athletic leader” and by “disciplining expressions of emotions and bodily senses”.

The presentation of an imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders is particularly meaningful on a personal level because the top managers seek to influence others’ impression of them as legitimate, competent or/and successful leaders by incorporating personally held athletic values in the understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role. Moreover, the self-presentation practices mainly addresses the top managers’ ‘inner audiences’ and solely reflects their personal aspirations as occupants of the leadership role.

The analysis has shown that the idealized view of an athletic leader becomes particular meaningful for the top managers when they successfully situate their personal aspirations into the conventional understanding of a ‘good leader’. By presenting themselves as athletic leaders, the top managers in this study highlight two prevailing leadership ideals that are particularly meaningful to themselves. They seek to become self-disciplined role models for others both in private life and at work; and they anchor the sense of ‘distinctiveness’ in this self-presentation through creating a masculine elitist status as leaders. They give symbolic meanings to individualized stories in athletic endeavours.

Some researchers have pointed out that the formation of leaders’ sense of self is both an “intimate” and interactive process, which involves their personal aspirations such as passions, aesthetic values, emotions and self-concepts, as well as reflexive activities that relate to the response of others and the external demands in a situation (e.g. Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993: 580; Beech, 2008). Beech states that managers may enact their non-professional self-identification in a process where they intend to form an identity as a “competent” leader (2008). The non-professional private self-identification, according to Beech, serves an “internal stimulus”, which constantly ‘interferes’ with managers’ identification with the type of professional identity that is enforced through managerial discourses (e.g. “external discourse” in Beech’s term) (Beech, 2008).

However, my study on the sporty top managers has shown that these individuals use their extraordinary athleticism (based on their own judgement and perceptions) to compose “success stories” with which they facilitate the legitimacy of the imaginative view of self as occupants of the leadership role (e.g. Goffman, 1959). The personally held lifestyle values do not seem to
distract the top managers’ intention in building a strengthened sense of self as leaders. They actively enact the athletic values to interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours mainly to address distinctive leadership pursuits such as “becoming a superwoman”, “becoming a transformational leader”, “competing with other guys” or “shaping a ‘healthy’ culture in the organization”. By incorporating personally held values and beliefs from the lifestyle domain, the sporty top managers attempt to fulfil individualized aspirations regarding their role as leaders and thereby making their understanding of self as leaders meaningful for themselves.

The sporty top managers in this study have shown creativity in incorporating athletic values with the notion of leading as role models and with prevailing masculine ideals in leadership. Moreover, they also show creativity in aligning the personally held athletic values with their descriptions of the situational characteristics. In this way, they present the ‘athletic self’ as if it were a natural outcome of the needs of a leadership situation. By doing this, their ‘becoming athletic leaders’ is both personally meaningful and socially eloquent.

Furthermore, some leadership scholars point out that the process in which leaders construct their sense of self as occupant of the leadership role is meaningful in the personal dimension because leaders in general seek to secure a sense of self in a “destabilized working world” (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006: 206). In these studies, scholars suggest that managers, corporate executives and business leaders establish the secure sense of self and the status as a leader through presenting an identity of themselves that accords with available managerial discourses in a situation (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). This way they attain heightened self-esteem and confidence, and they strengthen their feeling of power status, which thereby leads to enhanced psychological well-being (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

My study finds that each sporty top manager creates an individualized story about their experiences in athletic endeavours to address personal pursuits as leaders. Yet, in the same process, the sporty top managers choose to address some prevailing leadership values such as self-disciplinary qualities and masculine values that are closely associated with the notion of athleticism. This shows that in a situation where direct leadership or managerial demands are not available, the sporty top managers are capable of incorporating some important leadership values (their own choice) with personally held values to create new self-narratives as occupants of the leadership role in the self-presentation process. This way, they situate the individualized experiences in socially acknowledgeable leadership notions. By doing so, they give legitimacy to the personal imaginative view of their understanding of self as the occupant of a social role (McCall & Simmons, 1966). This sense of
legitimacy may in turn boost the top managers’ self-esteem and confidence in the new self-meanings as athletic leaders (ibid.).

Moreover, findings in the analysis indicate that while the top managers make a self-presentation meaningful for themselves, they simultaneously attribute new nuances of meanings in understanding their role as leaders. They also attentively merge prevailing leadership notions to the new nuanced self-meanings through giving them symbolic meanings that conventionally indicate qualities of a ‘good leader’. While incorporating personal aspirations with the leadership role through both verbal expressions and expressive performances, they create new narratives about the image of ‘good leaders’.

**Becoming self-disciplined role models both inside and outside the workplace**

The sporty top managers in this study unanimously choose to use self-disciplinary values that are associated with sports, athletic endeavours and athleticism to facilitate their pursuits of leading as role models. Leaders are often defined as role models who come to influence employees’ social learning by exemplifying their own value orientations, behaviours and performances (Beck, 2014). It has been indicated that leaders who act as highly self-disciplined role models are capable of influencing a wide range of employee values and fostering employee imitations (Maierhofer, Griffin & Sheehan, 2000). Hence, the idea that leaders ought to act as a role model has been widely regarded as a socially acknowledgeable notion in leadership.

In this thesis, the notion of ‘becoming a role model’ has been repeatedly emphasized by all five top managers. The top managers articulate their determination about becoming the role model for others not only at work but also in private life. Johansson and colleagues have discussed how a group of sporty top managers mould fit and healthy image for the aspiration of becoming “a bodily role model” (2017: 15). In this study, I find that the process of ‘becoming the role model’ lies not only in the actual athletic practices that the top managers are carrying out, but also in the creative narrative skills and expressive performances that are enacted by the top managers when they told their stories about their experiences in athletic endeavours. In other words, the top managers fulfil their aspiration of becoming self-disciplined role models through a successful self-presentation in which they construct stories about themselves and perform to adhere to the imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders. With self-presentational practices, the sporty top managers transforms to an athletic role model who is highly self-disciplined and masculine.
Furthermore, athleticism is not formally linked with leadership skills or leaders’ personal qualities. The top managers in this study incorporate athletic values in their ‘role scripts’ to highlight the self-disciplinary qualities of a good leader. They attribute new meanings that concern body aesthetics, gendered characteristics, behavioural, as well as moral guidelines to an image of a self-disciplined role model both in private life and at work.

Moreover, the concept of being or becoming a role model as a dominant value in leadership is often articulated as an abstractive notion, which is also open to different types of interpretations and realizations. My study finds that the sporty top managers use athletic endeavours as a new source of self-meanings, upon which they pronounce and legitimize new attributes to understanding leaders as self-disciplined role models. Not only do they give new athletic meanings to leaders as self-disciplined role models, they also materialize the abstractive concept of the self-disciplined role model by imitating self-disciplined, physically, mentally and morally fit ‘real athletes’.

Making athleticism as the symbol of an elitist status in a ‘man’s world’

Previous research indicates that occupants of the leadership role tend to strive to create a sense of meaningful self in the workplace by stressing their superior status in identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Studies find that managers and corporate executives use their behaviours in leadership practices as a manifestation of their hierarchical status, which is distinct and distant from the ‘ordinary’ others. Hence, occupants of the leadership role anchor the meaningfulness of their sense of self in the sense of elitism, as well as in the affirmation of the authoritarian status (e.g. Maravelias, 2013; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This thesis, by providing a thorough analysis on how five sporty top managers enact expressive skills and performances to interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours finds how both men and women attempt to outline an elitist status as athletic leaders through pronouncing masculine values with different approaches.

The athletic leaders are characterized as ‘real athletes’ by heightened physical mastery and by aesthetic values and mental strength. I find that the sporty top managers inscribe the heightened physical mastery and gendered aesthetic values as new attributes to an elitist status of the athletic leaders. In this process, men and women enact different approaches. Yet both men and women seek to highlight particular masculine characteristics as attributes to an elitist status. They attempt to appear superior to ‘ordinary others’ by adding an athletic framework that includes highly ‘masculinized’ behavioural, aesthetical, and moral substances in the understanding of self as leaders. My study finds that while securing an elitist status in the understanding of self in
becoming athletic leaders, the sporty top managers reproduce, strengthen and perpetuate prevailing masculine values.

From a conventional view, capable, competitive male bodies imply power, dominant status and competitiveness; whereas vulnerability and frailty are taken as given traits of female bodies (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). Athletic values project masculinity (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). The muscular, toned, well-defined body image of a man is often thought to indicate physical strength, professional competence and aesthetic attraction, which define masculinity (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011: 207). People imitate the behaviour of athletes with the aim not only of obtaining enhanced physical capacity, but also to maintain an image that conveys competitiveness and success in their respective professional areas (ibid.).

Furthermore, previous research indicates that masculine values are dominant in leadership (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996; Collinson & Hearn, 1996). An idealized leader in business organizations is typically described as a highly self-disciplined, masculine individual who is instrumentally purposive and aggressive in pursuing success (Kerfoot & Knights, 2004: 438; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Hence, in business organizations, prevailing leadership characteristics are more likely to be associated with masculinity (Eagly 1987; Eagly & Karau 2002).

Previous studies indicate that the lasting dominance of masculine values in top positions is partially due to the asymmetrical number of men and women occupying the leadership positions. Yet studies have also suggested that although an increasing number of women have begun to occupy the leadership role, masculine values remain dominant features in the evaluation of a competent leader, because women are often required to acquire masculine qualities in order to sustain their status and legitimate position in business organizations (Kerfoot & Knights, 1996; Collinson & Hearn, 1996). This also contributes to the sustainability of masculine values amongst leaders.

In organizational studies, it has been pointed out that the masculine nature of leadership ideals is often upheld, modified and/or reproduced in diverse organizational processes and embedded in the taken for granted workplace rationalities (Kerfoot & Knights, 1998; Knights & Kerfoot, 2004; Collinson & Hearn, 1996). My study finds that masculine values - such as desire for winning, power and success, infinite strive for heightened competitiveness - become embraced, strengthened and/or modified by both male and female top managers in their self-presentational practices. Hence, while becoming ‘athletic leaders’ the sporty top managers bring personal touches in the perpetuation of major masculine values in the understanding of a good leader and leadership.
In this study, the findings show that the sporty top managers produce, reproduce and uphold some masculine values to add convincing strength and distinctive status in the creation of athletic self-meanings. They fulfil personal pursuits of becoming athletic leaders through merging social interpretation of athletic values with prevailing masculine notions. They establish an elitist status in a ‘man’s world’ by using athletic values to highlight masculine qualities in various ways. Both female top managers acknowledge the fact that women and feminine characteristics are less favourably evaluated for leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Yet they avoid problematizing existing masculine notions that systematically marginalize women from top positions. Instead, they are responsive to stereotypical feminine characteristics and open to ‘modifying’ themselves through engaging in athletic endeavours like their male peers (e.g. Cooper 1974: 17).

The analysis shows that the two female top managers seek to obtain masculine characteristics by merging masculine implications of athletic values in their interpretation of athletic endeavours. They express strong intentions in using the “masculinized” features of athletic values as an important attribute in legitimizing their status as leaders and in career advancing. At the same time, they attempt to suppress and eliminate stereotypical gender characteristics in the leadership role. By mimicking their male peers through committing to athletic endeavours, they help to reinforce masculine ideology in leadership (Ford et al., 2008).

In the analysis of “performances”, the findings show that although female top managers appear to submit to masculine values voluntarily, this process is not free of ‘struggles’. They produce contradictory narratives reflecting their bewildered emotions when talking about their experiences relating to athletic endeavours. This shows that they are caught between stereotypical feminine characteristics and the obviously more prestigious, powerful masculine surface of the self. On the one hand, they try to avoid being perceived as lacking the stereotypical masculine skills that are regarded as necessary in leadership. On the other hand, while conforming to masculine values, they express concern and a sense of guilt for not fulfilling their motherly responsibilities; and they express concern about the risks of being perceived negatively while violating the stereotypical feminine characteristics (e.g. Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Previous studies have indicated that women - in top positions or in social life in general - are often discriminated in two ways: first, they are discriminated for lacking stereotypical masculine skills; second, they are judged for lacking feminine characteristics (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This may explain the ‘struggles’ that are expressed through “expressive control” by the two female
top managers in this study. That is, they face tough challenges whether conforming to or rejecting the dominant masculine values in leadership. They seek personal meaningfulness in the self-presentation as athletic leaders through attempting to balance feminine and masculine features in the formation of self.

Findings in this study show that the two female top managers, although they express much bewildered emotions, choose to rely on acquiring masculine skills to survive and prosper in their leadership positions. That is, they mobilize athletic endeavours to secure their status as leaders in a man’s world. They choose to prioritize their role as leaders even outside working hours and the workplace; and are ready to compromise the character of motherliness to adhere to the image of an “infallible” athletic leader. Becoming a masculinized, competitive, fit, athletic leader makes the most meaningful, distinctive and elitist sense of self for these two female sporty top managers.

Moreover, previous studies indicate that men tend to regulate and redefine masculinity in different social contexts (Courtenay, 2009). This study finds that the male top managers do not take masculinity for granted, either. Rather, they use any opportunity to regulate, appropriate and communicate the “correct” type of masculinity in different social contexts.

Analysis of ‘performances’ shows that the male top managers in this study regulate a masculine image of an athletic leader that is lithe, slender and muscular just like an elite runner. They seek to use this body image to demonstrate an elitist image that differs from conventional hegemonic masculinity, which is normally represented by a body build with large muscle mass and signifies aggression, impulsiveness and forcefulness (e.g. Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Courtenay, 2009). The regulated masculinity in the process of the self-presentation amongst the male top managers is intended to convey new forms of subtle meanings of self-reliance, persistency, enduring power and endless desires for winning and success.

The findings show that the masculine features of a leader are upheld, modified or reproduced not only in formal organizational processes, but also in informal activities in lifestyle behaviours. The top managers, with their interpretations of athletic endeavours, convey the imaginative view of an appropriate masculine feature for a good leader. They instil an ‘athletic body framework’ to project desired masculine values in the leadership role. This new bodily dimension of masculinity concerns athletic aesthetics of the body; it emphasizes the size, shape and weight of the body; it highlights the importance of the physical capacity of the body; and it contains expressions of bodily experiences such as feelings, bodily senses and emotions. This athletic body image is created to demonstrate an elitist status as a leader whose
physical mastery, level of competitiveness, self-reliance and endurance are all superior to the ‘ordinary’ others.

This study illustrates ways in which the sporty top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours to express personal aspirations to become athletic leaders with individualized approaches such as becoming a ‘transformational leader’, ‘super woman’, ‘the master of choice, change and challenge’ etc. Hence, their self-presentation in such a process is meaningful for the top managers on a personal level in two ways. While becoming athletic leaders with individualized approaches, the top managers are not only able to convey personally held values in the construction of understanding as occupants of the leadership role, but they also seek to present the qualities of self that accord with broadly acknowledged leadership values such as self-disciplinary and masculine qualities. Combining the personal pursuits with socially recognizable leadership values, the top managers give legitimacy to these personal aspirations, and they reinforce a sense of security in terms of their status and authority as athletic leaders (e.g. Knights & Willmott, 1989; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006: 206; Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

Nevertheless, it is observed that, while constantly creating new nuances of self-meanings in athletic endeavours and striving to adhere to an idealized image, the sporty top managers make the self-process an infinite route of ‘becoming a better person and leader’. In order to ‘invent’ new elements in self-meanings that may impress and convince others, the top managers actively engage in creative self-presentational practices, too. Hence, the fulfilment of the meaningfulness of self interweaves with an endless pursuit of the ‘better self’.

7.2 Initiating an ‘othering’ process

People construct their sense of self through relating to others (Charon, 1989; Denzin, 2004). In the dramaturgical analysis of self-presentation, the analysis of ‘casting’ reveals that the top managers, while trying to legitimize the ‘athletic’ self-fantasies, constantly classify people as ‘life coaches’, ‘similar others’ and ‘different others’ based on the athletic values, beliefs that they personally hold. Hence, the self-presentation of athletic leaders is also expressive in terms of shaping their interpretations about others.

Leaders’ acts are always interpersonal (Furnham, 2005: 568). The formation of leaders’ sense of self is an interactive process (Beech, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009). In this study, analysis finds that the self-presentation of sporty top managers is an interpersonally meaningful process in two ways. First,
while becoming athletic leaders, the top managers use the (imaginative) voices of others to fulfil self-verifying purposes. Second, they intentionally or unintentionally initiate an ‘othering’ process by overtly expressing their preferences and dismissive attitudes to others.

In previous leadership studies on the formation of leaders’ identity, scholars have implied that leaders’ self-expressions contain dialogical elements that respond to others’ opinions with or without the presence of others (Beech, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009). Leaders adjust their self-expressions to respond to views of others aiming either to establish an image that fulfils the expectations of others or to serve self-verifying purposes (ibid.).

Findings from this study show that the top managers firmly believe that their own understanding of athletic values is universally validated. Based on this belief, they classify other people into different ‘supporting roles’ to strengthen the creation of self-fantasies. In their self-expressions, they do not articulate any humble intentions such as attempting to understand what others really think or believe. Rather, they use the voices of different types of others mainly to verify ‘who they are’ and ‘whom they want to become’. Hence, they define themselves as athletic leaders through giving different identities to others (e.g. Denzin, 1992; Charon, 1989).

By defining others, or sometimes stereotyping them, the top managers strengthen their self-presentation. They provide general references about the appreciated qualities of themselves through defining the self by defining others (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 629; Alvesson, 1994). With this, they boost their own confidence in athletic values by incorporating voices of others (e.g. the voices of ‘life coaches’ and ‘similar others’) as their own inner address in the self-presentation (Holquist, 1981: xxi in Beech, 2008: 53).

In presenting the self by defining others, the top managers simultaneously initiate an othering process. By overtly articulating athletic aesthetic values, expressing behavioural preferences and defining moral codes, the top managers differentiate others according to their fitness and physical capacity, the size, weight and shape of their bodies, and their lifestyle routines. They express obvious respect for those who are superior or similar to themselves, and they voice obvious doubts and distrust towards those who are ‘different’. They thereby assert the distinction between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ behaviours, ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ aesthetic values, ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ individuals.

Furthermore, leaders’ behaviours are expressive in terms of values and beliefs that are vital to their sense of self; yet at the same time, through their utterances and actions, intentionally and unintentionally, they also form a value basis for the identities of others (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Shamir, House & Arthur,
Shamir and colleagues have pointed out that in constructing their own self-concepts and self-expressions, leaders exert influencing forces on the formation of self-concepts of others, too (Shamir et al., 1993).

Moreover, leaders occupy a uniquely powerful position in organizations. They are crucial members of decision-making processes and they are capable of defining the reality of others (e.g. Smircich & Morgan, 1982). One of the most important features of leadership power is *inclusion* and *exclusion* (Domhoff & Dye, 1987; Goodin, 1996). Leaders often realize this power through shaping shared understanding of a situation and providing desired behavioural references to employees (Smircich & Morgan, 1982).

In this study, I only focus on examining the self-expressions of the top managers. Thus, I am not able to draw conclusions on whether or not they bring about influences on the behaviours or sense of selves of others. Yet, based on a scrutiny on the self-expressions of the top managers, I am able to detect expressive indications that they articulate while addressing the interpersonal relations with others, which may potentially lead to the actual inclusion of some people and exclusion of others.

Findings in ‘casting’ show that the ‘othering’ process embedded in top managers’ self-presentation contains imperative notions that may potentially impose coercion on others in terms of what they ‘ought’ to be and ‘should’ do. For example, verbal expressions used by the top managers in ‘casting’ episodes are heavily loaded with value indications and contain imperative managerial meanings. The top managers - while trying to strengthen the expression regarding their image as athletic leaders - articulate obvious admiration for individuals with heightened physical mastery and express overt judgemental attitudes towards those who are ‘unfit’. There is hence a tendency that they may give rise to ‘similar others’ and seek to exclude those individuals who fall outside such an athletic framework from organizational processes such as selection, recruitment and promotion (e.g. Domhoff & Dye, 1987).

Furthermore, scholars of social sciences have argued that the increasing obsession with physical mastery that excessively emphasizes the surface appearance of the body creates harmful assumptions that pertain to the external evaluation of a person’s internal qualities (Chambliss & Blair, 2005). Such assumptions increase the risk that people who are labelled “overweight” will be seen as ‘sloppy’ and lacking the ability to control life situations. Previous studies have shown that these people have fewer employment opportunities (Chambliss & Blair, 2005). Hence, it is reasonable to postulate that when the top managers define their relations with others, by and upon personally held athletic values, they run the risk of evaluating the work-related qualities of others based upon athleticism, physicality and appearance.
Exclusion is meant to ensure exclusivity (Goodin, 1991: 345). Findings from this study show that the top managers explicitly articulate what (physical) qualities are preferred and what ought to be filtered out for a good leader and a competent employee. At the same time, they create ‘exclusiveness’ and ‘elitist status’ with regard to the degree of physical mastery, athletic behaviours, and fitness. Presenting the self as an athletic leader, the top managers in this study typically regard life and work as a competition, where ultimately only the most competitive, the fittest, the most powerful and youthful ‘super-human’ succeeds and prevails. By defining others based on these personally held beliefs, the athletic leaders celebrate the exclusiveness of the powerful, patriarchal, masculine and self-disciplined individuals who are like themselves. At the same time, they identify and modify or even marginalize those who are physically weak, unwell, unfit or feminine. However, in this ‘othering’ process, any gesture of excluding people from organizational processes based on biased assumptions and labelling such as “unfit”, “unhealthy”, “aged” and “abnormal” individuals, is unfair to others and unjustified.

7.3 Creating an obscured notion of ‘health’ in organizations

Leaders are defined as the group of individuals who come closest to the establishment of the culture of the organizations (House, 2002; Yukl, Leadership in organizations, 1981). They come to influence the value basis of organizational culture by framing their experience in a way that provides a viable basis for actions for themselves and for others (Peters, 1976; in Smircich & Morgan, 1982: 258). Leaders mobilize meaning of some values to provide a new focus of attention in their organizations (Peters, 1978; Pondy, 1976; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Beech, 2008).

This study shows that the top managers are like performers who constantly seek to affect others’ interpretations of the reality while presenting themselves. By presenting themselves through developing dramaturgical plots, which are based mainly on their personally held athletic values and experiences in athletic endeavours in childhood and career development, they also seek to lay a value-basis for others’ understanding of the importance of athleticism and for their future behaviours both in private life and at work.

In the self-presentation, they constantly define the situational characteristics to underscore athletic qualities as an indispensable and necessary new feature
for ‘good leaders’. Hence, the self-presentation is meaningful on a social (organizational) level because it indirectly conveys sporty top managers’ intentions in shaping others’ interpretations and understanding of the social and organizational situation in which they are situated.

This study shows that the top managers ‘set the scene’ in the self-presentation through asserting situational characteristics based on their personally held athletic values and beliefs. In this process, they define a situational norm, which is centralized with meanings of athleticism; they assert situational rules and regulations through articulating their views on ‘healthy’ organizations. Furthermore, while asserting the importance of the ‘healthy organization’ they repeatedly emphasize their responsibilities as leaders for changing the culture of their organizations and leading others in all aspects of their lives.

In the process of becoming athletic leaders, the top managers shape the understanding of a ‘healthy organization’ and the notion of being and becoming ‘healthy’ through obscuring the notion of ‘health’ from its original meanings. This new notion of workplace health contains a strong emphasis on sporting activities, competitive capabilities, power and the desire to win. Hence, the meaning of being healthy becomes ambiguous in several respects.

**Highlighting self-discipline and masculinity in ‘healthy’ organizations**

The first ambiguity of the meaning of ‘healthy’ lies in the top managers’ verbal expressions that overtly emphasize the self-disciplinary qualities and masculine values. Findings from the dramaturgical analysis show that when top managers create an imaginative view of themselves as athletic leaders through defining the situational characteristics, they use social meanings of athletic values to redefine the notion of self-disciplinary and masculine qualities. They use meanings of athleticism to interpret health. And by defining health through promoting athletic values, they endorse meanings such as striving to win, aggression, power and success as necessary elements in the organizational culture.

Moreover, athletes put great effort into physical training to achieve success (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). By obscuring the meaning of health mainly through an emphasis on athleticism, the top managers are able to strengthen athletic values such as power, success and competitiveness in the name of health. Hence, in such circumstances, being or becoming healthy is no longer about the maintenance and achievement of an ideal state of physical and mental well-being. Rather, the top managers re-define the notion of health by encouraging an infinite body project.
In the workplace, self-disciplinary notions and masculine qualities are interlinked. They are often characterized by self-driven motivation in ways that facilitate an expression of self, and bound up with purposive rational instrumentality and in a heroic mastery of ‘reality’, as well as with the urge to compete and control (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 438). Findings in this study show that the top managers define the value basis of their organizational culture mainly by promoting the notion of self-control and disciplinary behaviours. By positioning athletic endeavours as the major source of self-knowledge and a necessary element both in private life and at work, the top managers articulate their ambitions in infinite pursuits in enhanced physical capacity. With this, they seek to invoke such an athletic approach in collective health management at work, too.

Furthermore, when the top managers interpret athletic values in their evaluation of the situational norm, they generally articulate ‘masculinized’ qualities such as enduring strength, purposive aggression, and competitiveness towards others as desirable qualities that they seek to foster in the organization. And they conclude that athletic values, which mainly promote masculine values, are the most effective solution to ‘an infinite self-project’. This way, they instil masculine meanings in the understanding of a ‘healthy’ organizational culture.

In addition, the findings show that the redefined notion of ‘health’ devotes little attention to the care of the unwell. The top managers not only avoid talking about unwellness and stress-related illness when presenting an idealized image of themselves, but they also give negative connotations to ill health and an unfit, overweight physical state. Hence, becoming ‘healthy’ in the workplace solely emphasizes producing “corporate athletes” and promoting ‘super humans’ that ‘fit’ the highly competitive business world. This obscured ‘healthy’ organizational culture utterly accentuates self-disciplinary principles and masculine values such as competitiveness, aggression, self-reliance, self-control and desire for success through promoting heightened physical mastery. Yet in this healthy culture, people who are judged as “unwell”, “unfit” and “abnormal” may risk being automatically excluded and sanctioned (Conrad & Walsh, 1992; Zoller, 2003; 2010).

**Overlooking health risks**

The second ambiguity in the notion of health concerns the paradox that athletic endeavours and physical exhaustion or fatigue are in fact damaging for the state of health. Courtenay (2009) points out that people (especially men) who engage in excessive and exhaustive physical exercise in order to pursue and demonstrate self-discipline and masculinity, power and prestigious status,
tend to neglect any indications of health risks. These behaviours may in fact lead to more severe injuries and negligence of serious indications of health risks (Courtenay, 2009; Broom & Tovey, 2009).

However, in this study, the sporty top managers emphasize their role as the central figure in leading the ‘healthy’ organization through exemplifying their own tireless athletic endeavours. They engage in such lifestyle behaviours partially based on self-presentational needs. That is, they intend to project the self as a competitive, self-reliant, self-controlled individual who strives to win and for success, yet completely overlooks the health-threatening possibilities of athletic endeavours.

Therefore, in talking about the notion of health through extensively emphasizing athleticism and physical mastery in an organizational context, the sporty top managers generate new narratives that focus mainly on promoting the ever fitter, stronger, more enduring and more competitive individual resources (e.g. Zoller, 2003; 2010). Yet they fail to address the ‘dark side’ of the athletic fantasies.

**Articulating managerial imperatives in the name of health**

Organizational scholars have stated that communication methods used in workplace health promotion programmes often contain managerial connotations (Zoller, 2003; 2005; 2010). This way, collective health management in the workplace serves as a new type of health ethic, which in turn purposely exerts managerial forces that penetrate the ‘whole life world’ of employees (Kelly, et al., 2002; Conrad & Walsh, 1992).

Findings in this study show that when the top managers ‘set the scene’ in the process of their self-presentation, they use verbal skills such as retrospective storytelling and meaning alignment to define situational characteristics with athletic values and beliefs. In other words, they formulate the expressions of their experiences in athletic endeavours in such a way that athleticism is a central theme both for people’s personal success and for the prosperity of an organization. This way, the top managers create new nuances of meanings about the social environment in which they are situated.

Furthermore, by claiming their responsibility for influencing the life of others in this situation, the top managers designate themselves with authorities and privileges in providing ‘correct’ information and in enforcing ‘appropriate’ health-promoting interventions in the organization. They thereby combine self-expressions with imperative managerial implications.
While making efforts to become athletic leaders, the top managers implement ‘healthy’ interventions through introducing ‘healthy’ rituals, organizing competitions and sport events in the workplace to make changes in employees’ lifestyles. They also monitor employees’ physical health through health screening programmes, and implement incentive processes according to the result of such an intervention. In addition, the top managers express strong intentions to incorporate health values - that are distorted by the notion of athleticism - into organizational processes such as selection, promotion and incentive systems. This way, the sporty top managers merge self-expressions with disciplinary managerial principles in the workplace. They express their intentions to extend responsibilities as leaders to the ‘life worlds’ of employees and to attain managerial power in the name of health.

Organizational scholars have previously pointed out that the recent development of health-promoting interventions in the workplace - which extensively emphasize the importance of a sporty lifestyle, controlled diet and disciplined exercise routine - tend to enlist employees in exhaustion of identity work in becoming “corporate athletes” (Kelly et al., 2002). Findings in this study show that while presenting themselves through determining situational characteristics by articulating personally held athletic values, the top managers contribute, through a self-presentation process, to shaping an obscured notion of health in the workplace.

Considering the inherent influencing power embedded in the position of leader, their expressions that emphasize the obscured notion of health maintain potential power in forging a new form of organizational wisdom; and may shape the basis of actions of employees and/or enrol them in “becoming corporate athletes” (e.g. Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993; Kelly et al., 2002).
8. Conclusions

Previous scholarly works that are interested in the phenomenon of ‘leaders in sport’ have taken various approaches. Some research advocates athleticism as an effective solution in leadership practice without anchoring an analysis in leaders’ own experiences in athletic endeavours (e.g. Loehr & Schwartz, 2001; Quick, Macik-Frey, & Cooper, 2007). Other scholars problematize this self-evident assertion through revealing unexpected effects that result from leaders’ enactment of passionate emotions in an athletic lifestyle in leadership practices (e.g. Thanem, 2013; Sinclair, 2005b). Some recent studies point out that the trend of sport and athleticism functions as a new form of “regulative regime” that defines the formation of managers’ sense of self and the bodily aspect of their identities (Maravelias, 2015; Johansson et al., 2017).

Holding the view that lifestyle behaviours are primarily self-expressive, and building upon the symbolic interactionist assumptions of self, this thesis expands on the extant literature on understanding the linkage between athletic endeavours and the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role through a study on self-presentational practices of a group of sporty top managers from Sweden. With a thorough scrutiny of how sporty top managers express (new) understandings of themselves as occupants of the leadership role through interpreting their experiences in lifestyle behaviours, this study highlights individuals’ agentic actions in infusing personally held values with the social role they occupy.

The theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism allow this study to view leaders as meaning-agents who are able to create new self-meanings through interpreting their experiences in different types of behaviours while attempting to adhere to prevailing leadership notions. Hence, the formation of the sense of self as leaders portrayed within such a conceptual frame bears both individualized attributes and socially recognizable indications. In the case of this thesis, through the scrutiny of how five sporty top managers interpret their experiences in lifestyle behaviours, I find that the top managers use expressive strategies in self-narratives and in both verbal and non-verbal ‘expressive control’ to generate ‘plots’ about ‘whom they want to be’ as leaders. In other words, the sporty top managers use athletic values to create distinctive views of themselves as good leaders, negotiate an authoritative
status, and strengthen, as well as attribute new elements to prevailing leadership notions (such as self-disciplinary qualities and masculine values).

Findings from this study also indicate that leaders do not simply become the identities or senses of self as leaders through drawing on prevailing, dominant leadership notions. Rather, occupants of the leadership role are creative in terms of incorporating personally held values in the construction and communication of their understanding of self relating to the social role. While trying to impress others with an imaginative view of self as leaders with particular qualities that are associated with personally held values, they infuse new nuances of self-meanings into the understanding of the leadership role. This way, leaders contribute to producing, reproducing, changing or upholding leadership notions.

Furthermore, this study shows that the process of formation of the understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role in lifestyle behaviours is a complex, interactive, iterative and creative route. It involves individual choices in terms of what values they seek to incorporate in the self-presentation as a leader, what type of leaders they attempt to become, as well as the prevailing leadership values they intend to uphold and convey that they perceive to be closely associated with the nature of behaviours in which they engage.

Moreover, this study incorporates the knowledge of social interpretations of sport, fitness and athleticism as the interpretive ground of self-expressions of the top managers. Without precluding the view that social meanings embedded in sport and athleticism contain ‘regulative’ coercions over individuals’ mind and body, this study allocates its analytical focus to exploring social actors’ ‘creativity’ in the self-process. The self-presentation portrayed in this study gives a thorough explanation of the process in which individuals utilize their lifestyle behaviours as a ‘prime site’ upon which they negotiate their social landscape as occupants of the leadership role. The dramaturgical analysis based on both the theories of self-presentation and the social interpretation of athleticism outlines a comprehensive overview of how the top managers ‘creatively’ articulate their understanding of self (as highly self-disciplined, physically, mentally and morally fit leaders) by using social assumptions of sport and athleticism.

In addition, by allocating four essential self-presentational elements in four different dramatic episodes, the dramaturgical approach of the self-presentational practices also provides a nuanced illustration of the linkage between five top managers’ athletic endeavours and the formation of their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role. It sheds light on understanding the formation the sense of self of leaders as a process that is not
only ‘self-relevant’. Rather, the study shows that the top managers present an understanding of self also through *defining a social situation* (including norms, rules, important roles and an elitist status) with athleticism in the centre, *outlining an idealized role-script* with an athletic meaning-frame, and *initiating an othering process* based on athletic values. Hence, the formation of the sense of self as occupants of the leadership role in athletic endeavours is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful.

In sum, through unpacking the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours in athletic endeavours and the formation of their sense of self in a self-presentation process, this study further contends that lifestyle behaviours that take place outside the workplace serve as an important source of self-meanings for occupants of the leadership role. Occupants of the leadership role are capable of creating new nuances of self-meanings as leaders through interpreting their experiences in lifestyle behaviours (e.g. athletic endeavours). While seeking to present an idealized self-image through making sense of their experiences in athletic endeavours, they, in turn, generate new narratives about ‘good leaders’, about others, about leadership and the understanding of the leadership context. This implies that the formation of understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role engenders new meanings in its own right.

**Contributions**

This thesis departs from the notion that leaders’ athletic endeavours are linked with their sense of self as members of “corporate elites” (Maravelias, 2015; Johansson et al., 2017). The study contributes primarily to understanding the formation of leaders’ sense of self as occupants of the leadership role in lifestyle behaviours (e.g. athletic endeavours); and it renders some insights into the formation of leaders’ sense of self as occupants of the leadership role in a general term in following ways.

First, based on an overview of social interpretations of values of athleticism, this study provides a broader scope of insights into the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours and their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role, which is beyond the narrow scale of rationalities within an organizational realm. In other words, leaders do not only become strategists, decision makers, and “change experts” in operational and managerial activities to form their understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role (Svenningsson & Larsson, 2006; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). Rather, they actively create and attempt to fulfil the imaginative view of themselves as occupants of the leadership role through negotiating the self as gendered, socially powerful individuals by addressing lifestyle factors, striving for societal bodily ideals and ‘fleshing out’ physical mastery. This thesis points
out that it is within informal lifestyle behaviours that leaders tend to discover alternative and innovative, as well as self-relevant, new nuances of self-meanings in the creation of an imaginative view of self.

Second, this study reveals that the formation of leaders’ sense of self is not a simple outcome of coercive force of any form of leadership discursive practices. This finding further contends that the process of formation of the sense of self of leaders is a complex route, which is both individualized and socially situated (e.g. Ford et al., 2008). Studying the linkage between leaders’ lifestyle behaviours and their sense of self as occupants of the leadership role from a self-expressive perspective, I gain an insight into how the individualized self-process that is anchored in lifestyle behaviours becomes situated in the understanding of a leadership role. That is, leaders create an imaginative view of themselves as occupants of the leadership role primarily to address individual concerns and pursuits both as a private person and as the occupant of their role. While expressing individualized aspirations in self-expressions, they also actively merge personal attributes with socially acknowledged notions about the role they occupy. They way, they uphold, and reproduce some prevailing leadership notions while adding other innovative elements to them.

Third, this study confirms the notion that the formation of understanding of self as leader is not only a function of verbal expressive devices, but that it also involves performative strategies in ‘expressive control’ by adding a new aspect of lifestyle behaviours (e.g. Down & Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1959). In other words, occupants of the leadership role use lifestyle behaviours to express important values and beliefs that comprise an imaginative view of self as good leaders. At the same time, they make efforts to present the self that is attuned to this view. Hence, they strive to both ‘talk the talk’ and ‘walk the walk’ as good leaders not only at work but also in private life. As shown in this study, the top managers interpret their experiences in athletic endeavours - through enacting retrospective narrative skill and meaning alignment, as well as performances in ‘expressive control’ - in one integrated iterative process. Thus, the self-narratives and performances are “seamlessly interwoven” in self-reflexive expressions in the sense that they supplement one another to bring forth a coherent, “infallible” image of self to the forefront (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Down & Reveley, 2009).

Fourth, this study points out that leaders do not merely create identity fantasies by reflecting upon formal leadership notions they are prescribed in available managerial discourses (e.g. Svenningsson & Larsson, 2006; Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Rather, my thesis suggests that leaders are co-creators of their own self-fantasies. They are capable of making new nuances of self-meanings through interpreting what they do (both in formation and informal behaviours)
to create and convey a new understanding of self as occupants of the leadership role. At the same time, they strive to legitimize personally held values as formal leadership attributes. For example, this study shows that the sporty top managers bring out ‘athleticism’ as a new aspect of leadership competence and thereby outline an athletic bodily framework which includes aesthetic values, moral and behavioural rules etc.

Fifth, to continue with the above-mentioned contribution, my study shows that leaders’ creating new imaginative views of themselves in lifestyle behaviours is not completely free from social constraints. For example, this study shows that the sporty top managers connect the wishful notions of athletic leaders mainly with self-disciplinary qualities and masculine values (such as the desire for power and success, competitiveness, purposive instrumentality etc.) which are regarded as prevailing values both amongst ‘good leaders’ and in social implications in athleticism and sporting activities (Yukl, 2002; Kanter, 1977). By merging athletic values with these prevailing leadership notions in this way, the top managers successfully transform personally held athletic values into legitimized attributes of a ‘good leader’ (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1966). This further indicates that leaders are creative not only in generating new self-meanings both inside and outside the work settings, but that they also show self-reflexive creativity in choosing the type of socially recognizable leadership notions that they see fit to give legitimacy to the new self-meanings. However, such creativities are found to be bound within socially recognizable prevailing leadership notions. Hence, by doing this, they strengthen, uphold and sustain some prevailing leadership notions mainly within the socially dominant frame.

The above-mentioned notions also further indicate that the formation of leaders’ sense of self as occupant of the leadership role is a self-initiated interactive and reflexive process that involves constant dialogic interplays between leaders’ own identification of self and their choice of dominant notions of “discursive baggage” that they intend to bring in the self-process (e.g. Beech, 2008). In other words, leaders actively create an imaginative view of themselves by connecting personally held values with selective notions within a conventional view of the leadership role (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1966). This finding echoes what Watson (2008) once suggested, namely that “we can come to understand better the ways in which individuals generally strive to come to terms with a changing world, sometimes relatively actively, sometimes relatively passively” (2008: 140). It is within the interplay between the “relatively passive” and “relatively active” self-reflexive activities that individuals secure their sense of self, the sense of power and status, as well as legitimacy as occupants of the leadership role.
Last but most importantly, by allocating meaning-expressions through ‘bracketing’ leaders’ power position in organizations and in the society, this study reveals that self-expressions conveyed through interpretations of lifestyle behaviours (e.g. athletic endeavours) are not merely ‘self-relevant’. Rather, the study illustrates a self-process that is expressive in terms of meanings on personal, interpersonal and social (organizational) dimensions. As shown in the previous chapter, the self-presentation process whereby leaders convey an imaginative view to others contains the content that addresses their personal pursuits in becoming an athletic leader, their evaluations of others, as well as assertive notions about the leadership context.

This last contribution also makes the most profound contribution to this study. Considering an asymmetrical power-relation between leaders and others, it explains that the formation of leaders’ sense of self in lifestyle behaviours is a meaning-expressive process in its own right. That is, by presenting their understanding of self as leaders through connecting athletic values and beliefs with the inherent status, power and privileges as leaders, the sporty top managers articulate how a leader ‘ought to’ be, not only in professional terms but also in physical, mental, moral and aesthetical respects. Furthermore, with this self-presentation process, the top managers deliberately pronounce their views about how others ‘should’ act both inside and outside the workplace. With the same self-process, they intend to shape interpretations about a social (organizational) situation through bringing some issues onto the organizational agenda, in which they define some (athletic) elements as new form of value basis in organizational culture.

To summarize, the formation of leaders’ sense of self is not a process that is rigidly adaptive to existing situational characteristics, to expectations of others, or to a conventional understanding about leaders. Rather, occupants of a leadership role constantly seek to shape and convey a new understanding about themselves which is personally, interpersonally and socially meaningful in both formal and informal behaviours. By pronouncing this understanding of self and attempting to live up to it, they produce, reproduce, or modify some prevailing understanding about necessary qualities of a ‘good leader’. In the same process, they seek to influence others’ impressions of them as the most ‘fit’ occupants of the leadership role; they categorize and sometimes stereotype others, which may eventually lead to systematic inclusion and exclusion of people; and they seek to forge new forms of wisdoms in the organization. Yet most importantly - being creative meaning-agents in forming an understanding of self in all life domains - occupants of the leadership role are the co-creators of meaning-frames that come to subjugate their own doing and being in the route of becoming ‘good leaders’.

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Practical implications

As mentioned previously, findings in this study have suggested that leaders, intentionally or unintentionally, fashion new understandings of the organizational culture (with athleticism in the centre), labelling others and modifying the notion of leadership while they convey specific qualities of themselves as leaders in athletic endeavours. Based on this, people who occupy the leadership role in organizations ought to be aware of the influencing potential that may emerge in their self-expressive behaviours.

In other words, when these individuals convey the understanding of themselves as an occupant of the leadership role with a particular type of quality, they might infuse, intentionally or unintentionally, suggestive implications about the organizational situation or about the understanding of other people, as well as leadership based on the very core value that makes their sense of self. For example, a leader who seeks to appear as a ‘change expert’ may try to convince others to perceive change as the most crucial element in the situation; whereas a leader who wishes to be seen as ‘artistic’ may attempt to outline a social environment where art is indispensable. Hence, while defining the organizational culture and giving identities to others based on personally held values and beliefs, leaders may potentially create new forms of organizational norms, rules and regulations, and initiate ‘othering processes’ based on these new situational characteristics. This may lead to consequences such as systematically marginalizing some people who are outside the criteria of the new norm.

In this study, the sporty top managers articulate strong value-laden self-expressions, which in turn may lay the foundations of the organizational culture. Yet the ‘athletic approach’ may not be suitable for all employees with all kinds of physical conditions. Moreover, the health norm that is mainly based on athletic notions and overtly emphasizes self-disciplinary behaviours may impose pressure on employees (Zoller, 2003; 2010; Kelly et al., 2002). Those individuals who perceive themselves as lacking physical capabilities may find themselves falling outside the mainstream organizational identity. Additionally, there is a risk that overweight, physically inactive, unfit individuals may be perceived as deviants in an organizational culture that only celebrates the healthiest, fittest, most enduring and athletic ‘super humans’.

Moreover, this study finds that the notions of health being conveyed through the sporty top managers’ self-presentation are obscured from the original intention of care, and focus more on creating “corporate athletes”. Previous studies suggest that collective health management as such tends to enlist members of organizations into exhausting identity work; such pursuits may also pose difficulties and lead to identity bewilderment for those who are not
ready to commit to intensive sporting activities, which may result in individual
resistance (Kelly et al., 2002). Therefore, leaders ought to be considerate about
existing demographic dynamics in the organization, and take into account
distinctive life situations and diverse individual attributes amongst employees.

Furthermore, in this study, while the top manager are ‘becoming’ athletic
leaders they simultaneously initiate an ‘othering process’ through creating
identity categorizations to others based on athletic values. This ‘othering’
process may readily discriminate people upon a determinist value basis
regarding ‘fit’ or ‘unfit’, ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’, ‘healthy or unhealthy’
categories. This may potentially segregate the organization into new types of
“in-group” and “out-group” based on elements that are not conventionally
regarded as work-related, and cause heightened stress and self-destructive
emotions amongst the “outsiders” (Turner, 1981; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel,
1979; Kelly et al., 2002).

Moreover, previous research has pointed out that leaders who enact passions
in lifestyle behaviours in leadership approaches are found to transgress
conventional understanding of leaders’ responsibilities and thereby cause
dysfunctional reactions amongst employees (Thanem, 2013). When leaders
present the self with creative and alternative notions that are based on
personally held athletic values, and claim the responsibility for influencing the
life of others both inside and outside the workplace, they risk ‘intruding’ on
the ‘life world’ of employees. This may thus also engender dysfunctional
reactions amongst employees. Therefore, when leaders eagerly present
themselves as occupants of the leadership role with particular qualities, they
need to pay attention to their self-expressions, so that they do not turn the self-
presentation into a process of manifestation and enforcement of a new form
of transgressive imperative managerial coercion.

Implications for leadership research and future studies

In leadership studies, leaders are defined as the group of individuals who come
closest to establishing the culture of the organizations (House, 2002; Yukl,
1981). They come to influence the value basis of organizational culture by
framing their experiences typically in ways that provide viable basis for
actions for themselves and for others (Peters, 1976; in Smircich & Morgan,
1982: 258). Previous studies have investigated how leaders create and manage
meanings through utterances and actions to lay the basis of actions for
employees and formulate new forms of organizational wisdoms (e.g. Smircich
& Morgan, 1982; Podolny & Khurana, 2005; Bass & Avolio, 1993). Findings
from this thesis point towards a new area of research for meaning creation and
management amongst leaders; that is, to study value-laden expressions that
are embedded in the process of self-formation amongst leaders in both work-related circumstances, and in informal lifestyle behaviours.

Furthermore, although drawing the conclusions that business leaders indirectly attribute new meanings to social encounters while presenting their understanding of self to others, this thesis does not intend to reinforce or exaggerate the inherent power and privileges in the leadership role (e.g. Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Rather, this thesis draws attention to the fact that, by the nature of their influencing role, and based on the inherent managerial authority, leaders’ self-expressions may exert more influence on defining the reality of the organization and employees than we believe.

Moreover, my thesis points out that the group of individuals occupying the leadership role in business organizations are capable of mobilizing the inherent institutional power to initiate substantial changes through interpreting engagements in micro-level practices (Pyke, 1996). They may forge new form of organizational wisdom, aesthetic values, bodily norms or new types of work ethic based on the creation of the imaginative view of themselves as leaders. Hence, leadership scholars need to critically evaluate leaders’ self-expressive behaviours (both in formal activities and informal activities), because what appears ‘self-relevant’ may in fact be interpersonally and socially meaningful, too (e.g. Schlenker, 1980; 1985). With findings from my thesis, I suggest that future research in leadership ought to pay more attention to unpacking the notion of self-expressions because these self-expressions may serve as a new source of meanings with which leaders potentially compose new norms, rules and regulations, and initiate social classifications in the workplace.

This thesis provides insights into how leaders’ lifestyle behaviours (in athletic endeavours) become expressive of their understanding of self as the occupant of the leadership role. It brings lifestyle behaviours to the foreground in theorizing the formation of leaders’ sense of self. These insights suggest that informal activities, such as lifestyle behaviours, make the ‘prime site’ where researchers are able to capture traces of ‘creative’ notions that concern leaders’ sense of self. Therefore, following other leadership scholars (e.g. Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Ford et al., 2008), I suggest that future studies should focus more on the actual doing and being of leaders in a broader scale of social settings that are not restricted within the organizational border. This way, scholars may be able to explore sources of creativity generated by leaders that are beyond the conventional managerial rationalities. For example, leadership studies may look into how leaders make sense of other types of lifestyle behaviours creatively to forge new self-meanings as occupants of the leadership role; and how they, in turn, make changes in organizational cultures and their evaluations of others accordingly.
Leaders are to some extent like all social actors, in that their senses of self are socially defined; yet, at the same time, they are meaning-agents who are eager to incorporate personally held values, private feelings and emotions as part of self-expressions in social life (Stryker, 1968; Schlenker, 1980; 1985; 2012). The meaning-creative leaders are not a bundle of identical, docile “flesh” and “bones” who are solely made up of dominant “discursive baggage” (e.g. Ford, et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2005a); rather, they are unique individuals who share a common pursuit to become influential, authoritative and elitist ‘good leaders’. Therefore, when we study leaders’ behaviours to understand the formation of their sense of self or their leadership practices, bearing in mind the inherent power and privileges that are attached to their social role, we need to approach each of them as individuals with unique histories, personal aspirations, concerns and other personal ‘baggage’ (e.g. Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2008). Only in this way, can our scrutiny of the self-formation of these individuals be “self-relevant”.

The world of corporate executives, business leaders and even political leaders has become more dynamic. Instead of rigidly following conventional behavioural and established moral guidelines of ‘good leaders’, occupants of the leadership role have increasingly begun to use personal principles to convey their understanding of self as leaders, and to address their leadership strategies. They constantly incorporate personal values to create new narrative elements in self-expressions, with which they seek to extend power of influence over people both inside and outside the workplace, and beyond work-related activities.

While acknowledging and commending their devotion and dedication as leaders, with this study, I would like to draw scholarly attention to the potential undesired social consequences that may result from the self-expressions of leaders in different social domains. The position of leaders in the hierarchy of organizations empowers them with privileges in defining the realities of others (e.g. Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Findings from this study also indicate that the process of the self-presentation of athletic leaders is meaning-expressive in its own right. This process elevates some prevailing leadership notions, it potentially initiates othering processes, and it is intended to lay the basis of organizational wisdoms. Therefore, it is crucial that we understand how a group of power holders, through acting in certain ways and expressing themselves in particular manners to produce, reproduce, or modify our interpretations of the reality to seek to make changes in lives of others, and/or to perpetuate privileged status in the workplace and in society.

Hence, both leadership scholars and practitioners ought to take the potential influencing force that resides in leaders’ self-expressions as a serious matter. We need to be cautious about what kind personal principles, values and beliefs
have become part of self-expressions of leaders, because they may, in turn, come to exert power to determine people’s understanding of a social situation and their evaluation of the qualities (or disqualifications) of others. We must not allow individuals who occupy powerful positions in all social domains to exaggerate their own grandiosity, to enforce personal values at the expense of the wellbeing of others, and to sweep up their followers along the way (Sankowsky, 1995; 65).
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Svensk sammanfattning

Denna avhandling strävar efter att förklara kopplingen mellan livsstilsbeteenden såsom utövande av olika idrotter på mycket hög nivå och utvecklandet av självkänsla som innehavare av ledarskapsroller. Utifrån ett självuttrycksperspektiv, med en dramaturgisk analys, undersöker avhandlingen hur en grupp mycket vältränade toppchefer i Sverige beter sig och presenterar sig själva.

I denna studie undersöker jag hur toppchefer tolkar sina idrottsliga ansträngningar för att uttrycka viktiga värderingar, övertygelser och farhågor om "vem de vill bli". Genom att förankra analysen i verbala uttryck i deras historieberättande och i deras performativa uttryck, visar den dramaturgiska analysen att livsstilsbeteenden såsom idrottsliga strävanden blir en källa till nya betydelser i chefernas självkänsla i jaget. Det vill säga, extremsportande toppchefer skapar en idealiserad bild av sig själv som atletisk ledare genom att införliva sportsliga värden med sin förståelse av vad det innebär att vara den ideala innehavaren av ledarrollen. De är kreativa när det gäller att presentera en föreställd bild av sig själva som de själva tror på och som inte bara är relevant för dem som individer, utan också när det kommer till interpersonella relationer och i en social kontext.

När de presenterar sig själv som en atletisk ledare, pratar de vältränade cheferna inte bara om sig själv, utan de definierar också ledarskapet med idrottsliga strävanden i centrum; de beskriver ett rollskript som kombinerar ledarskapsideal med idrottsettetiska värden; de uttrycker en avsikt att upphöja vissa människor och utesluta andra i organisatoriska processer. Den dramaturgiska analysen visar också att toppcheferna strävar efter att leva upp till denna föreställda syn på sig själva i sina framträdanden genom att disciplinera sitt utseende, känslor och kroppliga sinnesuttryck.

Denna avhandling bidrar till förståelsen av ledare som varande kreativa aktörer som aktivt använder sina livsstilsbeteenden till att skapa en idealiserad bild av sig själva i sin ledarroll. De använder livsstilsbeteenden som det främsta medlet för att ingjuta den sociala tolkningen av idrottsliga strävanden, till att skapa och uttrycka nya narrativ om sig själva som ledare. Detta, i sin tur, tyder på att ledarna inte bara blir sina identiteter baserade på formell ledarskapsdiskurs, utan också att processen för självbildningen är komplext, interaktiv och iterativ. Det vill säga att självbildning innebär intima reflexiva aktiviteter som tillgodosser individens personliga värderingar och individualiserade strävanden till att bli en idealiserad ledare, samt socialt erkända.
rådande ledarskapsföreställningar som de uppfattar vara nära förknippade med den typ av beteenden som de engagerar sig i. Sist men inte minst, denna avhandling indikerar att processen för självbindande är ett uttryck för betydelse som rör individer, social kontext samt relationer med andra människor. Genom att skapa en ideal självbild i livsstilsbeteenden på mikronivå, producerar, reproducerar och/eller ändrar ledare indirekt rådande ledarskapsföreställningar (t.ex. självdisciplinära kvaliteter och maskulina värden). De strävar efter att lägga grunden för organisatoriska visdomar, och de initierar en urvalsprocess som potentiellt kan leda till upphöjning av vissa människor och uteslutandet av andra.
### Appendix

**Table 1. Research participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Company (typology instead of real name)</th>
<th>position</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>gender</th>
<th>Typical sport activities and frequencies</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
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<td>Adam</td>
<td>Engineering Consultancy</td>
<td>CEO and Executive Chairman since May, 2012</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Running, skiing, swimming, tennis etc.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Leadership &amp; Recruitment</td>
<td>CEO and Partner</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Running, skiing</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
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<td>Running, Karate, Rugby</td>
<td>Irish</td>
</tr>
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<td>48</td>
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<td>Running, skiing, swimming,</td>
<td>Norwegian</td>
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<td>CEO</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mountain climbing and other sports</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>IT and Software</td>
<td>Nordic Regional Director</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Running, spinning and other sports</td>
<td>Danish</td>
</tr>
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<td>Nordic Marketing Director</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Martial art</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
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<td>Regional Manager</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Running, skiing and other sports</td>
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<td>Mary</td>
<td>Grocery and production</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Marketing</td>
<td>HR Director and Owner</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Aerobic</td>
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<td>Swedish</td>
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Table 2. Interview and observation data

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<td>2 hours</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
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<td>Susan</td>
<td>office/school campus</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>office/school campus</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>2 pages</td>
<td>2 pages</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 3: Major themes emerged in empirical material in the pilot study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why is athleticism and participating in sport important for you?”</th>
<th>How often do you exercise?</th>
<th>What kind of sports do you do?</th>
<th>How do you feel about your engagement in sporting activities?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Doing sports transformed me as a person and a managers”</td>
<td>Everyday</td>
<td>Running</td>
<td>“It makes me a stronger person”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Doing sports has made me work more effectively”</td>
<td>At least two hours everyday</td>
<td>Skiing</td>
<td>“I become more persistent”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Healthy organizations are more productive”</td>
<td>“If I am not able to exercise every day because I am travelling, I make it up at weekends”</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>“I learn to discipline myself through doing sports, especially in long distance running”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“People work better and live better life”</td>
<td>“We make exercising into a family activity”</td>
<td>Golfing</td>
<td>“I can face more challenges”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Doing sports makes me younger”</td>
<td>“It is important to make exercising part of your daily routine”</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>“I learn to deal with failures in life”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We need more healthy and energetic people at work and in the society, don’t we”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hiking in the mountains</td>
<td>“I become a female manager who is different from others (women)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I believe new elites are emerging amongst sporty CEOs and executives ...”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Martial arts</td>
<td>“I make my male peers respect me more”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kayaking</td>
<td>“Competing with guys in sports makes me feel great about myself as a female manager”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>CrossFit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Boxing</td>
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</table>
Table 4 (continuation of table 3): Major themes emerged in empirical material in the pilot study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you understand by being ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’?</th>
<th>How do you tell whether a person is healthy or not?</th>
<th>What is your view of a good leader?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Being healthy is being physically and mentally fit”</td>
<td>“Healthy people eat healthily, exercise regularly”</td>
<td>“A good leader looks fit”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Living an active life”</td>
<td>“Healthy people do not smoke, and they do not often drink”</td>
<td>“A good leader is not only a performance star, but also a great representative of the values of the company”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Keeping a positive attitude in life and in work”</td>
<td>“Healthy people look fit”</td>
<td>“A good leader is able to influence people both at work and in life”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Staying in shape”</td>
<td>“Healthy people are always happy and positive”</td>
<td>“A good leader is inspirational to others in many ways”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Never losing control of yourself”</td>
<td>“Healthy people do not complain much”</td>
<td>“A good leader is responsible of making changes of employees’ lives in positive ways”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Being able to overcome obstacles in life with good spirits”</td>
<td>“Healthy people energize others”</td>
<td>“A good leader brings along others in healthy living ...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Men know better about how to be a competitive leader”</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Doctoral Theses

Stockholm Business School
<table>
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<td>Matrixing Aid. The Rise and Fall of 'Results Initiatives' in Swedish Development Aid. Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University.</td>
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<td>Andreas Sundström</td>
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