**Dissertation Interview - Participant C – 14 March 2024**

Fanie Mordaunt: So thank you for joining us for the interview. So just to give you positioning in terms of what we're trying to achieve for the purposes of this research, we don't need your name and surname, so you don't have to even refer to yourself in the first person and you don't have to tell us the name of the company that you work for. You can leave that out.

Participant C: Okay.

Fanie Mordaunt: You can just describe the type of organisation it is and, but we can confirm that it's financial services.

Participant C: Yeah.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. Then for the transcript, we're going to remove your name.

Participant C: Okay.

Fanie Mordaunt: We'll just call you Participant C because your name and your identity is not relevant. More your experience.

Participant C: Okay.

Fanie Mordaunt: So you can feel free to just discuss it in the way that you feel best. The questions are very open ended. So, you can you can share your experiences, reflect on some examples, and but I'm more interested in your experience as a leader.

Participant C: Okay.

Fanie Mordaunt: So, can we just start off by just frame working this organisation that you work for? So, could you just discuss what kind of organisation it is and what kind of work to do you guys do there?

Participant C: Okay. It's a financial services organisation and then it's a group entity based in South Africa, but with multiple franchises and brands. Underneath it and I work for the headquarter company. If you want to call it that or the corporate centre, and we are very big player in South Africa in the financial sector and but broad financial. So, with the big corporate investment banking to even motor vehicle financing and different aspects and retail banking.

Fanie Mordaunt: And what is your role in the organisation?

Participant C: I said it's the corporate centre and managing tax mostly, but the tax compliance risk and governance aspects, not just South Africa but also internationally.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. And how would you describe the culture of the company?

Participant C: That's an interesting one. I think we've got a very big, strong owner, manager culture. It's kind of the thing that underpins the business. You are allowed and enabled and empowered to treat your area as your own business and everything that comes with it, in the sense that you are able to almost be entrepreneurial in the way and very innovative in the way that you manage your area. So, you have a lot of freedom in terms of deciding what are the best operational processes, practices that you're going to introduce to your area to ultimately manage the risk.

Participant C: It's a very collaborative environment in terms of culture. So, teamwork is a very big thing for us, and strong relationships are very key in our business. So, you can just imagine from those things that I've said it's a very. Dynamic collaborative, innovative business. But how else could I could I? Could I describe the culture in a word, it's warm. I just want to say it's warm because in as much as we are in financial services, you could think it's very clinical. It's not. It's a very warm environment.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. And how many people do you manage?

Participant C: Five.

Fanie Mordaunt: Five people. So how long in your whole career have you been managing people?

Participant C: In different phases, because at first I was more like a team leader for my team. So maybe for the first four years of my career, I was more of a team leader and people reported to me indirectly.

Participant C: I didn't get involved in the performance management, although I contributed towards it. And they reported to me on a day to day for their operational kind of responsibilities. And so now for the past six years, I've been a manager of the team now with the responsibility on hiring Recruitment.

Participant C: Reid might get involved in as well as the actual performance management.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay. And how would you describe your leadership's down?

Participant C: Very nurturing in the sense that I've learned to understand that managing people has to come with one, allowing them the space to also grow and define their journey in a career, being very supportive to what is their own goals. And their own dreams. So, I don't necessarily define what their goals should be. We collaborate together to define their goals and the nurturing aspect is being a support system for them in self-actualising. Because I'm realising they've got their own career journey and their own objectives and as much as we are working towards a common objective, they've got their own goals and I try to be nurturing towards those things. And I also again going back to the owner manager culture, not to micromanage them and to give them the space to define how they want to manage their area and their spaces. I'm very big on making sure that if there's a big pie, everybody has their pie and you manage your pie in the way that you feel is fit for you, but ultimately delivers what we need to deliver on. So definitely not a micromanager, very nurturing and very collaborative in the way that I want my team to operate. I make sure that at all times we working together as a team and everybody has their own space, but ultimately. Respecting the fact that we are in an organisation and we have a lot to deliver on from a professional base, but do it in a warm way.

Fanie Mordaunt: So you've been managing this team for six years and obviously within the six years the pandemic happened. So if you just think pre pandemic versus during and then post, how would you say you adapted your leadership to suit this now new virtual setting?

Participant C: Sure, the pandemic was very difficult in terms of a spanner in the woodworks when you had the physical contacts and the benefits of being in the same space with a team, it was easier to manage in a way because you saw each other every day. If there were queries, we actually sat in the same space, we could quickly sit and have a quick discussion around. Certain matters and we work in a space where you need the relationship of trust and you need a lot of understanding. And we work with very complex things being in text and the size of the organisation. And sometimes it is a high pressure, not sometimes. Most times it is a high-pressured role, so with all of that it's easier to manage personalities, environment, mood and deliverables. When you are face to face with someone because they can see your intent in what you're saying and the pressures that we're facing, we're able to easily communicate on them. When we moved to an online system I had, for example, two team members started during the COVID period and that was very hard because that never made me, they don't understand my temperament. I don't really understand their temperaments. There's some stuff you can't actually connect on online. Virtually you won't really know who I am and my style of communication. You might misread how I say certain things and under pressure if I'm pushing instructions, it may seem and difference to how it would have come across had we meet in person. So how I had to adapt was to obviously find tap into the different leadership styles and see which one would be best suited for an online model and where I could lead in a way that was still authentic to who I am, but also still allowed the autonomy or the independence of the team to pull through in a virtual system which is very hard. I also had to learn to be very understanding and accommodating ways. I didn't have to have that prior to COVID because we all showed up at the office at a certain time. We all went home at a certain time during COVID. I had to understand that some of my team members now had kids at home. They had to help the kids with school or they now had an environment that wasn't necessarily as productive because now in a single space is a whole family home schooling together with working, which could come across as being unproductive. But you had to adapt to learn to adjust to the new environment and allow them also the space to redefine their working environment, working hours, working spaces. So being very flexible and understanding, but also still trying to build some sort of a framework for the team which is very hard and in in a very hybrid space and then now coming back, our organisation has made a decision to ask all of the employees to come back to the office four days a week post COVID but have left some manager discretion with regards to whether you do want to allow your team to work from home. And for me, my adjustment was I found my team was way more. I've got a lot of people who are mothers with very young kids and I found that during the COVID period they productivity was very high because they managed to set up systems that enabled them to deliver. And I think they were actually even more effective and delivering than prior to COVID because they either log in very early 4:30, they are already in like working and delivering by 8:00 o'clock they've almost done most of their work. And then again in the evening, they have high bulks of productivity, productive time. If I can call it that, so I because I appreciated how productive they were and how actually motivated they were by the fact that they could still be present mothers it actually created in them the diligence to want to give back more to their employer. That was accommodating. I then observed some of that, so I have allowed them to still two to three times a week. In fact, for them to determine when they would like to work from home, I haven't forced anyone to come back to the office. I have asked that we still have two days a week meeting time at the office because I am still in a building. We live in the benefits of that, but I've left the flexibility around days that you can work from home and you decide in a week when that is because I have actually seen the fruits and the benefits in terms of their deliverables and their commitment to their business and their work by being allowed the time to also be present and things that matter to them like family. So I think those are the things for me.

Fanie Mordaunt: So when you started managing virtually what is like an example of one of the challenges you encountered when you started your virtual leadership journey that you personally struggled with, and how did you overcome this challenge?

Participant C: Managing personnel with different personalities, in the sense that and different characters, you are in a pandemic, which means that people are highly stressed and people are reacting differently. Some people have lost family members like I had in my team. Some people are now having to deal with very difficult circumstances that were just thrust upon them. So now you see different characters pull through. Some people actually struggle to remain productive in that time. Some people were very emotional because of the stuff that was happening around them, and I never really had to manage personalities and character and still be able to motivate my team and be able to pull out the best in them despite personal challenges like how I had to drink over it. So, I think in my leadership I had to update my people's skills quite a lot and actually look to the business to empower me on how to best support them at a time when they are facing critical challenges in their lives. But we also still have critical deliverables and I felt like pre-COVID. I never really had to tap into that side of myself where I had to accommodate personal circumstances and still manage your team to deliver. So that was the thing that I felt I struggled with, but the business was able to also equip me with soft skills around people, leadership in times of crisis. But I can say that.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah, that is very true.

Participant C: Yeah.

Fanie Mordaunt: And obviously now with times of crisis, we're no longer in the pandemic, but we still have crisis. Like for example, there's a cost-of-living crisis. There are power cuts, water cuts, political instability that causes, you know, riot.

Participant C: Yeah.

Fanie Mordaunt: So people who live in townships, they have, they have roads, being blocked off and sometimes they can't make it to the office. How does this impact on productivity and how do you manage that?

Participant C: So I think that's where COVID kind of brought us closer to the ground in the sense of understanding that you have a business, you have a mandate, but life is constantly happening and sometimes it's happening unwillingly. It's not that the employees that are managed or the stuff that are manage are asking for these things to happen. Like you say, load shading, some of them stay in townships where they're not able to leave in the morning because the road has been blocked by protesters, obviously because of all the upheavals that are happening in the country and you now have to learn. And what I've learned goes the pandemic, and it equipped me with was more compassion and understanding for the fact that we are running a business. We do want to be a class in the way that we deliver on everything that we do, but life does happen and we have to be accommodating and we have to adjust constantly and I think agility is the biggest word that comes to mind. Just being agile as a leader, being agile in how we deliver to the business, understanding that we might have defined five objectives for the day. But here comes life. Here comes load shedding. Here comes the Dave. Here comes a lockdown that is going to mean that we need to go back to the drawing board and redefine what our operational processes or targets are for the day.

Participant C: And if you are very agile and accommodating but still remembering that there is a deliverable, you can actually adjust and still remain very successful at delivering and that's what I realised during COVID for our organisation, for example, we delivered some of the highest profits that we ever have in the business during COVID and the leadership even in themselves said that was a surprise for them because they had actually expected that we would underperform at that time. But I think they understanding was when you're very accommodating and agile to your employees and your life and to what is happening, you actually see your employees delivering over and above what they have to because you have accommodated them. So I've kept those Post-COVID and understanding that I can't have a very rigid, legit leadership style. I can't have a rigid approach towards my deliverables or my team, or what they have to deliver. I have to remain agile understanding that life is happening and then go back to the drawing board as many times as I have in engaging them and still finding ways of delivering. And if you are open and not reactive and collaborative, you still definitely can deliver. In fact, you can actually surprise yourself and deliver way above what you expected because you're accommodating as a leader.

Fanie Mordaunt: And in in a in a virtual setting, because I see you it looks like you're also at home today. And how do you develop trust within your team when you're all Co located and working virtually?

Participant C: I think that was one of the very big things during COVID management style prior and what I was taught as a management style just by the people that have managed me prior to COVID in my working life was that I see you, I see you working behind your laptop. Then I know that you're working, and I know that you're delivering. And that was kind of the environment and a lot of the trust was because you saw me working and you saw me delivering and we were in the same meeting at the same time at a time, like COVID went account. See you and a lot of the times we didn't even have our laptops. Our cameras on during meetings, that's a culture that's developed post kind of COVID and our learnings around connecting and putting on cameras, you could be sitting anywhere. I don't know where you are and I don't know what you did in a day and we are not in a micro-managing environment. We also don't have a tick box exercise towards our deliverables, so sometimes it could go like to me or come across to me as though you've done absolutely nothing in a day. But I had to learn the trust in my team to know that they have been entrusted and they are capable people. And that's the first thing that I remembered. We hired capable people. We looked for talent that had and level of professionalism and I had to tap into that and actually encourage them and remind them of the reason that we hired them because they were self-leaders, self-made leaders. They were self-motivators and I had to tap into that, but also at the same time, we work in an environment where I know if your work is not being done, it's going to show. So, I have to release the trust to you to say give you enough rope to hang yourself. You are have been entrusted with these deliverables. I'm trusting you to be the professional that we hired you to be, to deliver them in a space where I can't necessarily see you. And if you do not deliver, it is going to eventually materialise and we will have the difficult discussions at that point. So as opposed to first not giving you the trust and babysitting you, I trust you, the trust I give you the trust we have, the hard discussions around how you're going to do it. And when you prove to me that you're not able to, then we can have a different discussion. And for me, I found that that has actually worked for most of my team. When you first offer them the trust, because then they carry the responsibility of the trust as well, that you've extended to them. But it has been a very interesting journey to watch. How different leaders manage that aspect? Because a lot of the come back to the office and sit here where I can see you is because of the lack of trust. But then I go back to questioning what was the calibre of the talents that you hired? Because if you've hired the right talent, I have employees where I know there may be sitting in hospital and they're going through difficult times, they'll actually be stressing about the deliverables and wanting to deliver at despite the fact that they in hospital and that always reminds me that's the calibre of professionals that I've hired. I don't expect that of them. I don't want them to do that. While they in hospital, but that's the calibre. And if you actually enhance, that's in them and reinforce the trust that you have in them and the calibre of employee that they are, they actually come to the party and deliver most times and you'll have rotten apples here and there. But that's per life. So, I just think it's, it's one of the things that we still will grapple with in the new environments, just that trust.

Fanie Mordaunt: And how do you integrate new joiners in the team?

Participant C: Very difficult. Our learner thinks COVID. Was you might have, for example, graduates, so people who are first time employees or first time working and, in their lives, they were robbed of the opportunity of this work with space. What it came with and the learnings that came from it, because how do you deliver to somebody a culture virtually, I can't embed in you, what is our culture because a lot of the way that we do work is because of our culture. If you were in our space before COVID, then you were with us every day you picked up on the way we communicated and the energy with COVID. We realise some of our new joiners were robbed of that they didn't understand the culture of the company because you can't pass that on online as much as what you can try. They didn't have those relationships of trust where they felt like I can just call Fanie and say I don't understand, this is not a stupid question. No, Fanie is actually a trusted person. I can open up to her and say this because they don't know. They've only seen you virtually, so now moving to the new space that we are in with new joiners. That's where I do support some office time because and where we have had new joiners, I have said to my team because we have a new joiner, we are going to spend more office time in the next few weeks to allow that person to get to know us, to integrate with them, to show them our way of work. And when they are settled enough, then we can revert to whatever our previous virtual arrangements were, because unfortunately, some of it cannot be passed down virtually. So that's where I feel there is still the need for the human connection.

Fanie Mordaunt: And have you had a situation where there's been a conflict on a virtual platform and how have you dealt with that?

Participant C: During COVID quite a lot, as I said, because you can't read a person's written communication is very hard to deliver on your intent on certain things, or the energy that you are actually trying to create is not always tangible via an email. And because of that, there was a lot of conflicts during COVID people under a lot of pressure. Obviously, personally living in their home spaces and so the tension came across through emails and it's harder again to solve because you're not there. Then you just see a lot of emails that seem, for example, very tense, very aggressive, and before the culture was in our environment. Anyways, after the third email and you can see I'm not understanding, you stand up and I'm just walk to you and I must talk to you. Because maybe verbal communication is going to help to avoid some of the misunderstandings of written communication with COVID. You don't have that, so I must go back and forth with you. Sometimes even a phone call is not the same as human interaction, so I feel like we've had to empower our employees, empower ourselves, tap into something different to make sure that in this new working environment with conflict, we are able to appreciate one that written communication sometimes is not going to deliver on based intent. Learn to pick up the phone rather than to go back and forth. And if you read offense in a mail rather phone. The person can ask or meet with the person and ask, can we please meet? I'm reading this. I don't know if I'm misunderstanding so that we can clear some of it because most of it ends up being broken communication or the evils of written communication. So, I think those are the things for me about conflict management in the new space that we're in.

Fanie Mordaunt: I was going to ask around performance management, but I think we touched on that quite a bit and just my last question is you've mentioned nurturing, understanding, flexibility, emotional intelligence, compassion and agility as some of the competencies. But are there any other competencies based on your view that you think make managing virtually and you know somebody managing a team virtually more effective, just having those competence?

Participant C: I think that's a lot of soft skills were not important before even answer exactly to the words. A lot of managers are just made managers because they can deliver in their work and I think that's a flow that exists in a lot of businesses, whereas we should actually empower people to be managers of people, to manage your work is very different to managing people. There are different characteristics. There are different personalities. There are different dynamics and I feel that something that still needs to be worked on and something that I've had to tap into myself is first of all, my personal mastery of myself, because if I can't master myself, I can't master others. And I think those have been very key for me, so good communication skills, empathy, empathy. Just understanding we are not managing robots; we are managing humans and humans come with various complexities that are going to need me to tap into my impact self to be able to assist them. The third thing I think as well that for me or are leadership skills that are needed now more than ever, is the agility. Like I said before, you need to be very agile. Today we could have this operating environment and by half past two because of something that's outside of our control, we are going to foster adapt to something else. So, to be agile in your leadership style and is very key so that you can accommodate people's needs, number one and what and what are the business needs and to what's happening in the world. And I feel where people have still struggled is to still have that old mentality and old style of leadership in a new environment where everything has changed and that leads to obviously then a lot of negatives for your employees that you're managing as well As for the organisation. But those are for me the things that I would say that, yeah, are key in this new environment.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay, no, thank you so much for your feedback. Is there anything that I that I didn't touch on that you wanted to maybe mention or add? No, nothing. I'm happy.

Participant C: Thank you.

Fanie Mordaunt: So just to let you know what we're going to be doing with this data. And I'm working on my Masters dissertation which focuses on just unpacking the competencies and that are required for Virtual leadership. And then my supervisor is also supervising PhD research. It's the head of people for the South African Reserve Bank. She's doing her PhD and she's developing a tool to now measure these competencies so that we can now start using it for recruitment and selection and talent development for Virtual Leadership settings. So, she's going to take my information, and then she's going to use it for her research, to develop this tool.

Participant C: Okay.

Fanie Mordaunt: And hopefully we'll have a South African based measurement tool that we can now start to cultivate leadership for the South African context. And based on what we believe are the core competencies for virtual leadership.

Participant C: Perfect.

Fanie Mordaunt: Yeah.

Participant C: Thank you and all the best.

Fanie Mordaunt: Thank you. And I just wanted to ask you in closing, is there anyone in in your organisation that you could refer me to that I could also interview?

Participant C: Yeah, I'm sure I can. How many do you need?

Fanie Mordaunt: I'm trying to branch out to other networks and so is there anyone that you know that will not just one?

Participant C: OK, I will refer you via email.

Fanie Mordaunt: Okay.

Fanie Mordaunt: Thank you so much.

Participant C: Thank you.