Exposé of the dissertation project

Contours of a transformative understanding of authority

Exploratory constellations of conflict situations in leadership contexts

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1. Introduction

Germany is contributing to a sustainable future with its global Agenda 2030. The 2018 update of the new edition of the Federal Government's sustainability strategy from 2017 describes, among other aspects, the principle of securing the natural foundations of life in the long run and enabling everyone a dignified life. To this end, decisions must not only take the economic performance into account but also equal participation. To ensure that developments are both ecologically and socially sustainable for present and future generations on a global scale, systemic interactions as well as technological and social innovations must also be considered (Deutsche Bundesregierung 2018, p. 50). In the scientifically oriented discourse on sustainability, not only the differentiation of the three dimensions of ecology, economy and social affairs but also an additional cultural dimension has emerged repeatedly, which relates, for example, to the perception and reflection of values, the use of time or ethical standards (Schmitt and Bamberg 2018, p. 6).

A definition of sustainability is only possible in a specific context

It is impossible to provide an appropriate, generally applicable definition of sustainability that is independent of people and situations. Sustainability is always context-related as well as bound to both time and people. Against this background, it is obvious to refer to the variety of perspectives and a diversity of sustainability, which, inevitably, has a conflicting and partly dilemmatic character (Schmitt and Bamberg 2018, p. 9). Sustainability is used to solve two very different, yet closely related problems: the preservation of our resource base for life and survival, and the responsibility in dealing with the so-called side-effect problem or the solution thereof. Müller-Christ understands this to mean that people and institutions are not only prepared to compensate for the side effects of their actions, but they even go so far as to forego the main benefits of their actions which could not be achieved without considerable side effects. This often requires a changed moral stance (Müller-Christ and Giesenbauer 2019, pp. 232–233). Basically, the question is: "How do we manage to create a society worth living in, in which individuals cannot achieve their main benefits (money, power, access) at the expense of others?" (Müller-Christ and Giesenbauer 2019, p. 233).

However, even if people recognise — and indeed define — sustainability as a common goal, they may have very different opinions about the way (methods and tools) for achieving this goal. This usually leads to both individual and collective conflicts of decision and action (Schmitt and Bamberg 2018, p. 8).

Transformation in times of the digital knowledge society

The transformation towards a sustainable, climate-neutral society is inevitably a process marked by conflict. It not only includes technological innovations but also the serious transformation of the ecosystem and social modernisation processes. Furthermore, progressive digitalisation triggers strong changes in social systems and lifestyles, which result in new political movements in many places. These sociopolitical movements interact with sociopolitical and economic structures and institutions (Englert and Ternès 2019, pp. 211–212). This illustrates why the so-called digital transformation requires a new interaction of actors from politics, society, economy and science, and it poses major challenges for all these actors on a local, national and global level (Englert and Ternès 2019, p. 212).

This requires orientation and leadership on the micro and meso level in companies. Yet in a different form than before. As Scharmer states (Scharmer and Hildenbrand 2019), the quality of the results generated by any system depends on the awareness which the people in that system act upon: how a situation unfolds is determined by the structure of the acting people's awareness and attention (Scharmer and Hildenbrand 2019, p. 32).

With my master thesis at the University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder, in 2018, I was able to demonstrate that the conflict styles and attitudes to authority shown by managers today are not conducive to dealing with conflicts in companies in a transformative way. As a consequence, this means that we will probably first have to change our thinking about leadership and management before this can become apparent not only in business but also in the whole of society.

Since I have transferred the new attitude towards authority from the pedagogy of the two psychologists Haim Omer and Arist von Schlippe (Omer 2010; Omer and von Schlippe 2009, 2016) to the leadership context (Baumann-Habersack 2015, 2017), a new attitude towards authority exists for the first time in the leadership context, which very probably has a transformative conflict style. Or described differently: the two psychologists have been the first to describe a new quality of leadership awareness and to devise it as an action-leading concept.

2. Theoretical framework and state of research

In the wake of the digital transformation of our society and economy, the planned research project deals with the problem area of leadership behaviour in the context of conflicts in companies, based on certain authoritarian attitudes of leaders. This is also connected to the consideration of whether a transformation of the attitude of authority subsequently also transforms the conflict style of said leaders. If this question can be answered to the affirmative, this work should also be able to describe the conflict style in concrete terms or

form a model or work out an individual transformative process. This would be an aspired, an ideal result.

I will outline the interaction and relevance with the issue in three important fields:

1. field: conflicts

   In 2008, the auditing firm KPMG conducted the first empirical, representative study on conflict costs in German companies, with the following key findings:
   - Every company spends about 10–15 percent of working time on conflict resolution.
   - Managers spend 30–50 percent of their weekly work time on frictional losses, conflicts or their consequences.
   - Fluctuation costs, severance payments, health care costs resulting from internal conflicts lead to costs of several billion euros annually.
   - Each case of bullying costs the company an average of 60,000 euros.
   - One percent of costs for employees are lost for unresolved conflicts.
   - The quality of communication influences around 25 percent of the turnover (KPMG 2009, pp. 19–20).

   Even if the exact costs cannot be determined due to the complexity and even if the study results merely describe tendencies explicitly, it is nevertheless clear that from a business management perspective companies and thus also managers should be interested in significantly reducing the costs of dysfunctional conflicts. Deductively, it can also be concluded that the conflict styles that have been (unconsciously) applied in corporate and management practice so far are partly responsible for these costs.

2. field: (digital) transformation and sustainability

   In many cases, the so-called *digital transformation* is understood as a technical, massive pattern change. This is not wrong, but it does not hit the heart of the matter either. In essence, the *digital transformation* to a more sustainable society is a fundamental, social change of pattern – generated by a change in our awareness. Changed or new technologies, additional economic growth and the social practices associated with it are not decisive but only a consequence thereof (Brunnhuber 2016, p. 29).

   Probably due to the current purely technical aspect, there are still relatively few studies that also include the socio-psychological perspective of the *digital transformation*. The consulting firm Celonis, for example, commissioned the market research firm Opinion Matters in London to investigate how companies manage their transformation strategies and what the obstacles to success might be. The survey was conducted in January 2019 and surveyed 1,009 business analysts as well as 1,002 executives in companies with over 500 employees in the UK, US, Germany and the Netherlands (Celonis 2019, p. 10). Additional

information on the study design is unavailable, thus, this survey does not meet scientific quality criteria. Nevertheless, individual results show a tendency towards the relationship between employees and managers in the transformation context.

For example, 55 percent of the employees surveyed said that they would feel more confident if they knew how the company was managed. They also indicated that a collaborative, transparent approach to transformation is critical to engaging employees. 45 percent of the business analysts did not believe that managers knew where they should start the transformation process. One of the reasons for this ambiguity and confusion is that grassroots staff are being told what to do instead of being asked for their opinion or consulted (Celonis 2019, p. 3). Here, the perspective of leadership authority can be used to derive the hypotheses that, on the one hand, leaders act with a traditional attitude towards authority, which is based, among other things, on the understanding that the manager knows best and tells employees what to do instead of treating them as colleagues. On the other hand, intransparency about the company's goals, the manager's approach and so on can result from the traditional attitude that managers think ahead and do not need to justify themselves to the *workforce*, which is then again what advocates of this attitude combine with transparency (Baumann–Habersack 2017, p. 110). As a result, uncertainty develops — reflected by the 55 percent of those surveyed.

The hypotheses may also be supported by an online survey of 13,500 specialists and managers done by the consulting firm Kienbaum in October 2018. There, 54 percent of the respondents said that management led them in a directive manner, 21 percent that superiors acted in a transactional manner, and 27 percent said that management led with a laissez–faire style (Kienbaum Institut 2018, p. 10). The study concluded: "Employees do not want a manager who permanently controls work performance and employees and regulates them by rewarding/punishing them (transactional) [or who] avoids making decisions themselves and agrees with everything (laissez–faire)" (Kienbaum Institut 2018, p. 11).

3. field: authority
   Leadership behaviour becomes particularly relevant in situations of conflict. For example, when employees violate rules or principles that a manager with overall responsibility cannot ignore. Here, it is not only the manager's effectiveness that becomes apparent. It also shows whether an existing culture is maintained or if said culture develops (further) in a different direction. To a manager or a person in a leading role (for example project leader, scrum master, product owner, product manager …) almost every conflict situation offers the finding of a new way of dealing with each other in order to change interactive

behaviour. If this happens consistently in similar situations, an employee will most likely be able to show new behaviour, thus, a change is initiated.

Especially at the height of industrialisation, in the decades around the turn of the 20th century, society and its values were different from those at the beginning of the 21st century. A predominantly patriarchal social structure prevailed almost everywhere. Men, starting from the father as head of the family and patriarch in the family as the smallest form of social organisation, generally had an unquestioned, ascribed position of authority in all areas of life (Baumann-Habersack 2017, pp. 73–74). The resulting asymmetry of power was largely acknowledged, especially by (married) women, children and young people, pupils or subordinates. This social context enabled superiors in companies to easily fulfil the formal-hierarchical authority function (Schulze 2011, pp. 15ff.).

Interpersonal conflicts between superiors and subordinates, as the role names used at the time were called, were in fact (pre-)decided, since it was a structural win-lose solution: those at the top have already won and are therefore right. These conflict outcomes were accepted more or less unquestioningly by said subordinates. The social narrative of the patriarchy defined these roles as well as their corresponding behaviour (Sternberger 1959, pp. 3ff.), particularly also the rule that there need not be any negotiation about it. *Potestas* (i.e. the official or functional authority as a possible source of authority within a hierarchical system) was thus clearly defined – also as a principle of conflict negation or conflict decision-making.

Due to the changes in social values in recent decades, the patriarchal supremacy of men has changed insidiously and lost its predominance (von Rahden 2005, pp. 161ff.). The increasing computerisation of companies, especially since the so-called third industrial revolution, has made it necessary for more people to contribute to solving problems or creating new innovations. Previously, this had often been the primary task of congenial engineers and inventors as company owners – who were usually also the patriarchs in their companies. Thus, the professional necessity of having a superior making the right decision or developing ingenious ideas (for the solution) became increasingly invalid. *Potestas* thus not only lost progressively concerning its social but also its professional importance. Managers who had worked for decades in a traditional authority function as well as with a traditional understanding of authority and who were described as superiors usually derived their (usually authoritarian) conflict management skills (basta, pressure, threats, fear, "fatherly advice" …) from this.

Against the background of structural and cultural change in society, such leaders are now increasingly aware that their effectiveness diminishes with these forms of conflict

management. For *potestas* (the functional authority) in a vertical structure hardly receives the necessary attribution of authority by those being led or becomes superfluous due to heterarchic organisational structures. This overtaxes many managers, since they could not or did not have to learn to negotiate conflicts on an equal footing and to bring their *auctoritas* into the equation. This leads to one important question: which attitude of authority and which resulting management styles are helpful for conflict management?

In recent history, only three dissertations in the German-speaking world have dealt with the topic of authority and leadership in companies (Ziegler 1970; Wagner 1978; Brünnecke 1998) — and not a single one in combination with the topic of conflicts.

In June 2019, I carried out a systematic database search on the question (and its scope) to find out whether there had been scientific papers published on this subject. The result: no empirical research on this specific research scope and the research question had been done worldwide until then.

3. Research project

The preliminary work and the state of research show that there is a relevant research gap in this field; this research project aims to close this gap to a large extent.

3.1. Objective and question

The aim of this research is not primarily to empirically validate or falsify the hypotheses and concepts. Rather, the aim is to develop a new concept and to substantiate or further develop it through empirical research in order to make it effective for management practices.

Aims of the research project:

Identification and description of possible, transformative conflict management patterns in authority relationships, of people with leadership responsibility in company conflict situations.

Research topics:

1. How do people in authority relationships with leadership responsibility deal with their conflicts in times of social transformation?

   Research focus:

   - People in organisational contexts of profit, non-profit and non-governmental organisations.
   - Conflicts between levels 2 and 7 of the conflict escalation dynamics according to Glasl (1999).
   - Social transformation as a deep pattern change towards a digital knowledge society, in the sense of the *presencing* of *theory U* according to Scharmer (Scharmer and Hildenbrand 2019).

2. How can the observations be explained on the basis of people's attitudes of authority and conflict styles?

3.2. Research theses

The following research theses can be derived from the research question:

- A pattern can be found in the data which can then contribute to a transformation of the relationship of authority towards one based on equality and non-violence.
- People with leadership responsibility can actively contribute to transforming a relationship of authority through another form of conflict management.
- To be able to apply a new, transformative conflict style, a transformation of the attitude of authority is needed.

3.3. Research design and methods

With a mixed-method design, I aim to close the research gap explained above. With this form of basic research I will contribute to the scientific knowledge in the field of authority, leadership and conflicts (Döring and Bortz 2016a, pp. 17–18). However, part of my work also aims to provide practice-oriented answers to questions posed by people in leadership roles. Thus, a part of my work also includes applied research (Döring and Bortz 2016a, p. 18). Since the topic carries a transformative impetus, the research method and design must be congruent.

The mixed-method research approach has the potential to be a basis for social change (Mertens 2007, p. 212). If this approach is coupled with the basic convictions of the transformative paradigm and used as a guiding framework, methodological decisions for dealing with questions of social justice will follow (Mertens 2007, p. 212) – in society as well as in its reflection in companies. And since companies are one of the core institutions of modern societies (Hiß and Nagel 2017, p. 332), the interaction of companies or organisations with society must be considered in the sense of social co-responsibility; even if this is not the primary scope of this dissertation.

I will illustrate the need for a transformative research approach to this topic with a small example here: it is striking that the term ''authority'' is not usually used for *female* forms of authority; rather, the female view of authority is referred to in the literature as *care* (Großmaß 2018, p. 173). This shows that work and research on authority is predominantly male (connoted) in our society. Then again, my gender as a male researcher seems to confirm this. Yet, research also always contributes to questioning the status quo, developing topics further, bringing new ideas into the world, in short: research stands for change and the future. Human and social sciences pursue the goal of scientifically investigating human and interpersonal issues. This scientific gain in knowledge should not only lead to the increase of secured knowledge; it can and should also help to solve practical problems. Social facts are to be described, explained, predicted and changed on the basis of social science research results (Döring and Bortz 2016b, p. 5).

For this reason, I choose the transformative mixed-method approach according to Mertens (2007). This is necessary because research does not inevitably serve the needs of those who are usually excluded in the research world due to their position of power. This shows that the potential of promoting human rights through the research agenda has not yet been fully realised (Mertens 2007, p. 212). The central principle of the transformative paradigm is the assumption that power is an issue to be considered at every stage of the research process (Mertens 2007, p. 213). Since authority is not to be equated with power but is without doubt a form of power (Landweer and Newmark 2018, p. 181), both phenomena are thus objects of

research. Against the background of the research objective, these dynamics must be taken into account in the research design.

The philosophy of science distinguishes between ontology, axiology and epistemology (and therein in methodology) (Döring and Bortz 2016c, p. 34). Applied to the transformative mixed-method approach this means …

… for the ontological assumption of the transformative paradigm: reality is socially constructed. In this sense, certain individuals occupy a position of greater power. As a result, other individuals may be more likely to be excluded from deciding on the definition of the research focus, the research questions and other methodological aspects of the investigation (Mertens 2007, p. 216).

… for the axiological acceptance of the transformative approach: people are to be treated with dignity and respect, in connection with the supreme principle of avoiding harm (to them). On the other hand, it is based on the awareness of the need to eliminate inequalities, by giving priority or at least equal weight to the voices of the least favoured groups in society. The implicit aim is to involve those who may not have sufficient power to present their points of view correctly, or to enable the less favoured groups to take an active role in social change (Mertens 2007, p. 222).

… for the epistemological assumption of the transformative research approach: questions of cultural understanding and the building of trust between researchers and participants in research are of utmost importance and lead to a cyclical research model. This involves building partnerships between the researchers and the members of the community under study, including the recognition of power differences and the building of trust through the use of culturally competent research practices (Mertens 2007, p. 218).

… for the methodological assumption in the transformative approach: raising awareness of the advantages of involving the researcher in the choice of data collection methods, using different methods (qualitative and quantitative) – with a deep understanding of the cultural issues involved, to build trust in order to obtain relevant data and the need to link the collected data to social change.

These choices regarding data collection are complex and require an awareness of the cultural values and practices of each stakeholder (Mertens 2007, pp. 219–220).

The ''role of the researcher in this context is reframed as one who recognizes inequalities and injustices in society and strives to challenge the status quo [...]'' (Mertens 2007, S. 212). Hence, there should be an interactive link between the researcher and the participants in the description or definition of the research gap. The research methods should be adapted to take

into account the cultural complexity of the research area. Issues of power should be explicitly addressed and issues of discrimination and oppression should be perceived (Mertens 2007, p. 216).

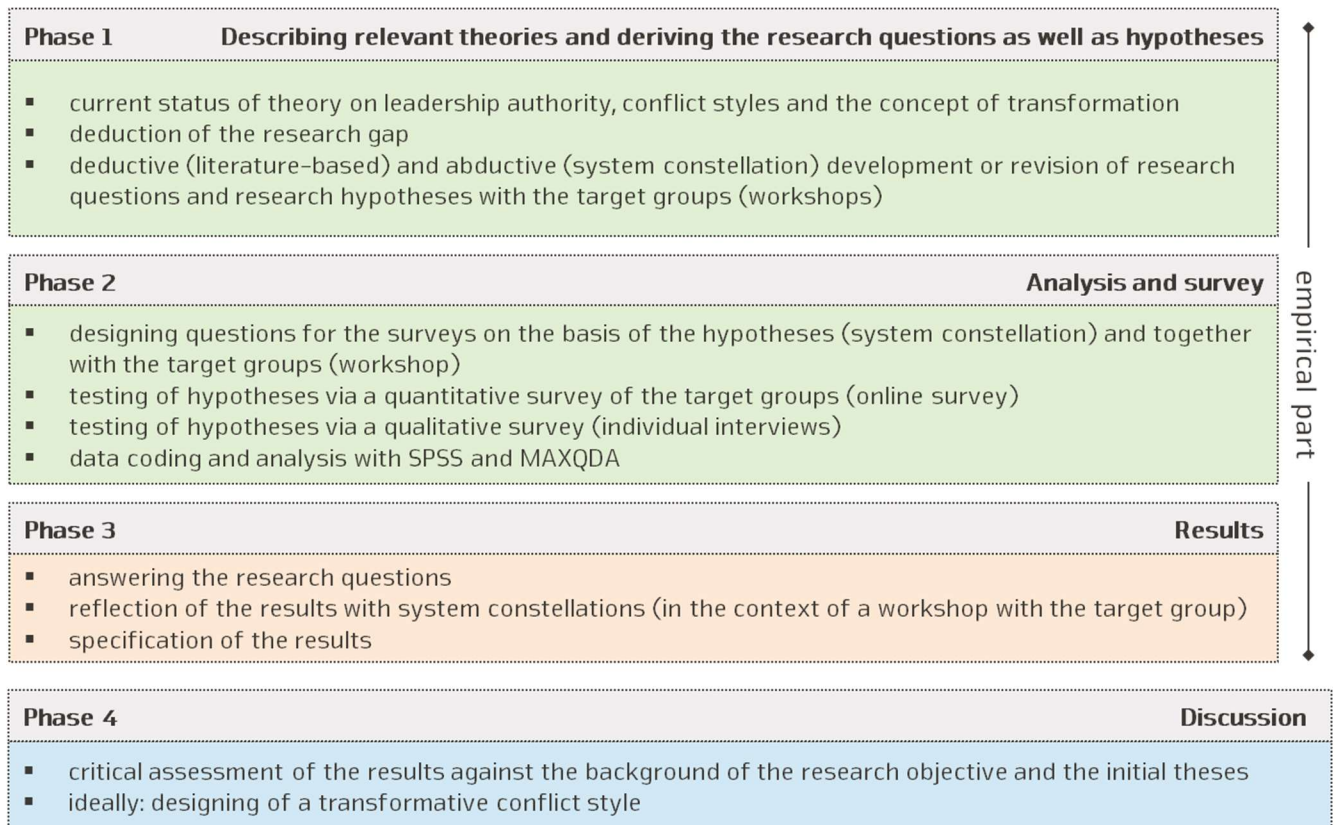Based on these considerations, I have derived the following research design for my work:

Phase 1	Describing relevant theories and deriving the research questions as well as hypotheses

- current status of theory on leadership authority, conflict styles and the concept of transformation
- deduction of the research gap
- deductive (literature-based) and abductive (system constellation) development or revision of research questions and research hypotheses with the target groups (workshops)

Phase 2	Analysis and survey

- designing questions for the surveys on the basis of the hypotheses (system constellation) and together with the target groups (workshop)
- testing of hypotheses via a quantitative survey of the target groups (online survey)
- testing of hypotheses via a qualitative survey (individual interviews)
- data coding and analysis with SPSS and MAXQDA

Phase 3	Results

- answering the research questions
- reflection of the results with system constellations (in the context of a workshop with the target group)
- specification of the results

Phase 4	Discussion

- critical assessment of the results against the background of the research objective and the initial theses
- ideally: designing of a transformative conflict style

empirical part (Phases 1–3)

Fig. 1: Research design

In Phase 1:

The current status of theory on leadership authority and conflict styles is largely based on my master's thesis from 2018, which will be reviewed and updated or supplemented as necessary.

For transformation (pattern changes), I refer to (reform) pedagogical approaches by Carolyn Shields (2011), Otto Scharmer (Scharmer and Hildenbrand 2019), Ruth Cohn (1974) and others, as well as to the scientific theory approach by Donna Mertens (2007). Furthermore, I examine and integrate transformation approaches from sustainability research.

The research gap, which I will qualify even further, stems from the results of my master's thesis.

Due to the transformative mixed-methods paradigm, I will involve my target groups already during the focus of the research question and the development of the hypotheses: one German, Austrian and Swiss woman and man each with leadership responsibility (disciplinary and only role-related) = 6 people; one woman and one man each with leadership responsibility,

from the same countries = 6 people. In total, I will conduct one or two workshops with about 12 people in order to substantiate the research question with them (in terms of content as well as language) and to derive my initial research hypotheses.

In Phase 2:

In this phase, I abductively generate new questions for the interviews on the hypotheses using the method system constellation according to Müller-Christ (2019; Müller-Christ and Pijetlovic 2018). The resulting hypotheses serve as a basis for a workshop to refine the new questions for the qualitative and quantitative part together with the target group. In this workshop, I also consult with the target group on whether the method of individual interviews should be retained or whether another qualitative format would be more helpful in order to obtain valid answers for the reality of the target group and the transformative methodology.

The questions from the system constellation and the workshop are used for the elaboration of the questionnaire, for the execution of the qualitative survey (individual interviews) (if necessary already with a quantitative part). Using the responses, I will then code the data. This results in an intermediate evaluation. The results, if necessary, are used to update the questionnaire (*quan*). I will conduct the quantitative survey with an online questionnaire. The procedure: occasional sampling with the snowball method (aspired: at least $n = 250$) – if technically feasible: web-based respondent-driven sampling instead of the snowball method. I plan to perform the qualitative data coding with SPSS and the pattern generation of the coded qualitative and quantitative data with MAXQDA.

In Phase 3:

I will derive the answers to the research questions from the data evaluation and pattern generation. This is followed by a critical evaluation of the process and the contents. I will reflect on these results in the interaction with organisational systems (method system constellations) as well as with the resonance of representatives of the target group (workshop or online survey). On the basis of these findings, I will then specify the results.

In Phase 4:

In this last phase, I will critically assess the results. I strive to generate a transformative conflict style from all the material, or a framework that describes action-leading principles, thus transforming leadership relationships.

3.4. Preliminary outline

Against the theoretical background and the research design, I envisage the following preliminary outline for my dissertation:

1. Introduction

2. Problem definition: conflicts and authority in the context of leadership and transformation

3. Theoretical principles and definitions
   3.1. Understanding of authority
   3.2. Understanding of conflicts
   3.3. Leadership understanding and approaches
   3.4. Understanding transformation

4. State of research, research gap and research questions

5. Methodological principles
   5.1. System constellations
   5.2. Transformative mixed-methods
   5.3. Quantitative survey: online survey
   5.4. Qualitative interviewing: in-depth interviews
   5.5. Evaluation system and procedure
   5.6. Critical evaluation of the methods used

6. Empirical part
   6.1. Description of the research processes
       6.1.1. Description of the software used
       6.1.2. Data collection with the different methods
       6.1.3. Data evaluation
       6.1.4. Data coding for the intermediate result
   6.2. Critical assessment of the research process

7. Evaluation of the interim result

8. Conclusions

9. Development of a framework for the transformation of conflict management patterns in authority relationships in the context of leadership

10. Summary and outlook

11. Literature

12. List of figures and tables

4. Time frame

Time frame	Task
**2021**	
January–May	**Phase 1:** Describing relevant theories and deriving research questions and hypotheses • State of the art theory on leadership authority, conflict styles and the concept of transformation • Deduction of the research gap • Deductive (literature-based) and abductive (system constellation) development or updating of research questions and research hypotheses with the target groups (workshops)
June–December	**Phase 2:** Analysis and surveys • Development of questions for the surveys based on the hypotheses (system constellation) as well as with the target groups (workshops) • Testing the hypotheses by means of a quantitative survey of the target groups (online survey) • Testing the hypotheses by means of a qualitative survey (individual interviews) • Data coding and evaluation with SPSS and MAXQDA
**2022**	
January–June	**Phase 3:** Results ▪ Answering the research questions ▪ Reflection of the results with system constellations (within the framework of a workshop with the target group) ▪ Specification of the results
July–	**Phase 4:** Discussion ▪ Critical evaluation of the results against the background of the research objective and the initial theses ▪ Ideally: development of a transformative conflict style
**2023**	
–January	▪ Critical evaluation of the results against the background of the research objective and the initial theses
February–September	▪ Buffer
October–December	▪ Theses: layout, editing, printing, binding and submission of the finished dissertation

5. Literature

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