

**A qualitative research study about
the application of Negative Capability in the leadership context
– The discovery of a hidden diamond to cope with disruptive change**

by

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Abstract

Negative Capability potentially facilitates innovative ideas, while facing disruptive change. In this qualitative research study it was explored, if and to what extent, the 14 interviewed leaders applied Negative Capability. Intuitively 21% of the interviewed business leaders applied it, while 79% of the participants struggled with taking time for a thinking and feeling pause, were unable to stay with unpleasant emotions or could not let go of old habits and assumptions.

Keywords

Negative Capability

Positive Capability

Containment

Dispersal

Unknown

Leadership

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1 Introduction

Globalisation and digitalisation paved the way for the modern VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) business environment (Johansen & Euchner, 2013), in which leaders have to deal with disruptive changes almost every day. Business challenges got a lot more complex and the impact of decisions became less predictable, because almost everything is linked. Leaders and entrepreneurs find less and less answers in conventional leadership models. A paradigm shift is becoming necessary: integral, more intelligent solutions are needed.

Negative Capability is a potential skill to enable leaders to face the unknown, without getting lost in the unpleasant emotional turmoil. It could be a distinguished leadership capacity to gain fresh insights and to facilitate new ideas, which could finally deliver new innovative solutions.

Negative Capability has been already known since 200 years, when the poet John Keats was reflecting on the “creative genius of high achieving individuals” (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1210). As big differentiator of successful people he identified Negative Capability as a state, in which a person is able to stay with the unknown. Due to Negative Capability, these high achievers were able to think beyond predetermined convictions by keeping a position of openness and receptiveness to the world (Keats, 1899), (Wigod, 1952).

Since then the term was adopted by various disciplines, like literature, art, religion, teaching, philosophy, social work, psychology and leadership, but a single overarching concept was not available. In the leadership context, only one case study about the contribution of Negative Capability in early stages of a joint venture, between three nations and a global corporation, could be found.

Despite the huge potential of Negative Capability, the concept was hardly explored in the leadership environment. Up to now it was not clear, if and to what extent Negative Capability was applied by leaders. Therefore, the objective of this study was to shed light on the conscious and unconscious personal dynamics a leader faces when attempting to practice Negative Capability. A specific attention was given to the main hurdles, which might prevent leaders to apply it.

To enable some kind of measurement of the application of Negative Capability and its potential pitfalls, the “Principle of Negative Capability” was developed and

introduced. It is based on the literature review, observations from coaching clients and my personal experiences. The principle consists of six core activities for Negative Capability and facilitates the attempt to analyse its application.

The transcriptions of 14 semi-structured interviews with business leaders, in addition to available context information and my personal experiences during the interviews, formed the data base for the thematic analysis. The data was mapped to the six core activities of Negative Capability to interpret the results.

Not a single leader had ever heard about Negative Capability and only a small number of leaders were intuitively able to fully apply all six core activities. The findings were discussed in detail and gave revealing insights into the application of Negative Capability in the leadership environment. The main challenges, why the majority of the leaders were not able to fully benefit from Negative Capability, were also identified.

It is hoped that this study could help leaders to become more conscious about the identified traps. Hence they could start to work on them in the future. This would enable them to face disruptive change more easily and allow fresh insights and more intelligent solutions to emerge.

Finally some potential limitations of this study were shared and future research topics were mentioned.

2 Research Aims and Objectives

When I came across Negative Capability in the EMCCC program, I realised its huge potential for learning, change and innovation.

But why had this topic never reached my awareness before? Despite its huge creative potential, it was never mentioned in any of the leadership trainings I had joined.

“Uncertainty is the soil out of which innovation grows” (Furr, 2016). When leaders are creating the future of the company, are they not automatically facing the unknown? How are the leaders dealing with it?

The more I investigated, the more I had the feeling that I have discovered a hidden diamond to cope with uncertainty and to foster innovation.

But why is the potential diamond Negative Capability suffering such an underrepresented, invisible existence?

Is the concept of Negative Capability unknown to leaders, or is the term “negative” simply too repellent?

Maybe the leaders are applying the principle intuitively already?

In this research study I investigated if Negative Capability is applied in the leadership context and to what extent. The objective was to shed light on the conscious and unconscious personal dynamics a leader faces, when attempting to practice Negative Capability.

I assumed, that there might be some barriers for its application. Which main hurdles have leaders to take?

Is it more difficult for leaders on the top layers to apply it?

Are women more prone to Negative Capability than men?

Is it easier for younger managers?

As I practise meditation regularly myself, I regarded it as good preparation for Negative Capability. Therefore I assumed that meditation might have positive effects on it.

I could imagine that a company culture, which supports learning and innovation, might also have a positive impact on applying it. So I wondered, is there a correlation between a supporting system and the application of Negative Capability? Or is it more a personal capability?

Would leaders be willing to learn more about Negative Capability?

The findings of this study could facilitate leaders in becoming more aware of the main challenges while applying it. By learning how to better practise it in their operational environment, the leader could get access to all benefits of this hidden diamond.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Negative Capability Origin and History

The notion of Negative Capability was conceived by the British poet John Keats in 1817 while he was reflecting on the characteristic qualities of a man of achievement, especially in literature (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002). In a letter to his two brothers he shared his understanding of Negative Capability as a state, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 1899: 277).

Keats attributed Negative Capability to Shakespeare, whose poetry displayed various points of view, without insisting on a particular vision of truth. He advocated to perceive, think and operate beyond predetermined convictions by keeping a position of openness, receptiveness and flexibility to the world and to be content with half-knowledge. Not every single complex circumstance can be explained by logic. As a poet from the Romance period he also granted human imagination a sacred position (Keats, 1899), (Wigod, 1952).

Since Keats’ first and only use of the term, Negative Capability has had a rich life on its own and was adopted by various disciplines like literature, art, religion, teaching, philosophy, social work, psychology and leadership. Therefore different aspects of Negative Capability have been emphasized over time and make it difficult to arrive at a single overarching concept (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002), (French, Simpson, & Harvey, 2009), (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016). Due to practicability reasons only those will be introduced, that add value to this research study.

3.2 Negative Capability and Psychoanalysis

In the psychoanalytic discourse, Negative Capability gained special attention due to its potential to create conditions for fresh insights, by functioning as a container for the pressure arising from uncertainty.

Eisold defined Negative Capability as “the ability to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow for the emergence of new thought or perceptions” (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1211).

And according to Bion, new insights depend on "resisting the tendency to fill with knowing the empty space created by ignorance" (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1213). To avoid conceptual closure and desire and to be available for new thought, he advised his analyst colleagues to forget what they know and want, but to be prepared to wait patiently for a new pattern to evolve (Simpson & French, 2006), (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002), (French & Simpson, 1999).

3.3 Negative Capability and Leadership

Leaders with the capacity of Negative Capability have been referred to as "chameleon" leaders, because of their ability to submit themselves to become what is needed in the present situation (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1219) and thereby to be "changed by the truth of the moment to undertake effective action" (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 186). Additionally they are described as "strings of a lyre" in the sense of an instrument for organisational inquiry, learning and innovation (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1218).

According to French Negative Capability can help leaders to manage change effectively by experiencing and containing own emotions and those of others until they have "in-formed" and "reformed" their understanding and a "change of mind - or heart" has happened (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 184).

Due to Negative Capability, creative leadership is supported by giving "free reign to the imagination" (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 184) and the "impossible" according to French et al. (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 186).

The ability to create a successful future is a principal task for leaders. Negative Capability facilitates Scharmer's idea of "leading from an emerging future" by "operating from a future space of possibility, that they feel wants to emerge" (Scharmer, n.a.: 1), (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 187). By shifting the "inner place from which we operate" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013: 1) through expanding the "thinking from the head to heart" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013: 1 + 2), leaders are able to leave behind old "habits of thought and action" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013: 2) and can introduce "fresh and unconventional thinking" (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 187). Thereby the whole organisational system moves from "ego to eco awareness" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013: 2) and arrives at a more holistic way of operation, that

fosters inclusion, creativity and innovation, instead of separation, division and the continuation on tested paths.

3.4 Negative Capability and Positive Capability

Most skills, competencies, knowledge and leadership techniques refer to Positive Capability and enable leaders to perform decisive action, based on knowing. Positive Capability forms the basis for Negative Capability, because it is the knowledge of not knowing, that allows to engage with Negative Capability (French, Simpson & Harvey., 2009).

According to Keats, Bion and Abbott, active waiting (Negative Capability) was not advocated for its own sake, but with the intention of achievement, in the form of insights related to a particular task and leading subsequently to learning, change and innovation (Simpson, French, 2006).

Insights occur at the edge of knowing and not knowing or certainty and uncertainty. At the edge, the truth in the moment is being exposed (French & Simpson, 1999), (Edmonstone, 2016). Once the truth in the moment is being exposed, the new gained insights can be materialized by Positive Capability (French & Simpson, 1999). Therefore Positive Capability and Negative Capability are two complementary, interrelated poles that are not mutually exclusive, but dependent on each other.

It has been criticised that Positive Capability, with its focus on performativity, is practised excessively in the organisational discourse, while Negative Capability is mainly neglected. This imbalance may result according to Alvesson & Spicer in “self-reinforcing-stupidity” (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 181) as habitual or merely reactive responses are exercised (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002), (Edmonstone, 2016).

3.5 Containment and Dispersal

One critical aspect of Negative Capability is containment, which is the ability to face, understand and transform emotions that arise from uncertainty, caused by half-knowledge and not knowing. Containment enables not to get overwhelmed by the pressure to react, and prevents defensive routines according to Argyris. Hence it

creates a space that allows to take risks and to embrace vulnerability by acknowledging the limits or lack of knowledge (Edmonstone, 2016).

Needleman called the opposite of containment “dispersal” and described it as the “flight from overwhelming emotion” (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1213). He distinguished between three forms of dispersal: “Explanations, emotional reactions or physical action” (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1213). When dispersal occurs, the engagement with a task is diverted into defensive routines (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002), which are reflected in off- or anti-task behaviour (Lehman & van de Loo, 2015).

Examples of dispersal are:

- “Shutting-out possible new ideas and feelings.
- Invoking prior knowledge, which may no longer even apply.
- Rushing into action and adopting a new certainty too quickly, before a new pattern has had a chance to emerge.
- Seeking to break down complex problems into more bite-size manageable chunks and pretending that what are wicked problems are in fact tame” (Edmonstone, 2016: 4).

Bion called dispersal a “curious business by which we closure off what we don’t want to see or hear” and “engage upon something familiar” instead (French, 2001: 486).

From Needleman’s point of view two options are available, when uncertainty is faced, either to disperse or to contain (Negative Capability) by staying with the moment and in uncertainty, until a new insight evolves and the truth in the moment is exposed (French, 2001).

Leaders may cope with these dynamics by becoming aware of their particular valency for dispersal and that the edge between knowing and not knowing or certainty and uncertainty has “potential for both creativity and terror” (French & Simpson, 1999: 7).

3.6 Reputation of Negative Capability

In the organisational context with its requirements for quarterly reports, leaders have to accomplish ambitious objectives and must meet their key stakeholder needs more

immediately. This creates high pressure and the default position is control and performativity (Positive Capability). Efficiency is held dear and measured by an “input/output ratio” (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002: 1222) according to Lyotard, which leads to the subordination of learning and truth. As Negative Capability is per se not measureable, it tends to be excluded from the organisational discourse (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002).

Armstrong and Fineman argue, that emotions are widely considered as a disturbance, impairing organisational functioning, rather than providing important information. Which may make Negative Capability also a negative trait (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002).

Since Negative Capability involves low status behaviour (waiting, observing, listening adapting and patience), compared to the high status behaviour of Positive Capability (action, intervention and decision making), it is widely underestimated, yet unnoticed, even if it might be highly valuable or even critical for the task at hand (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002).

3.7 Critical Thoughts

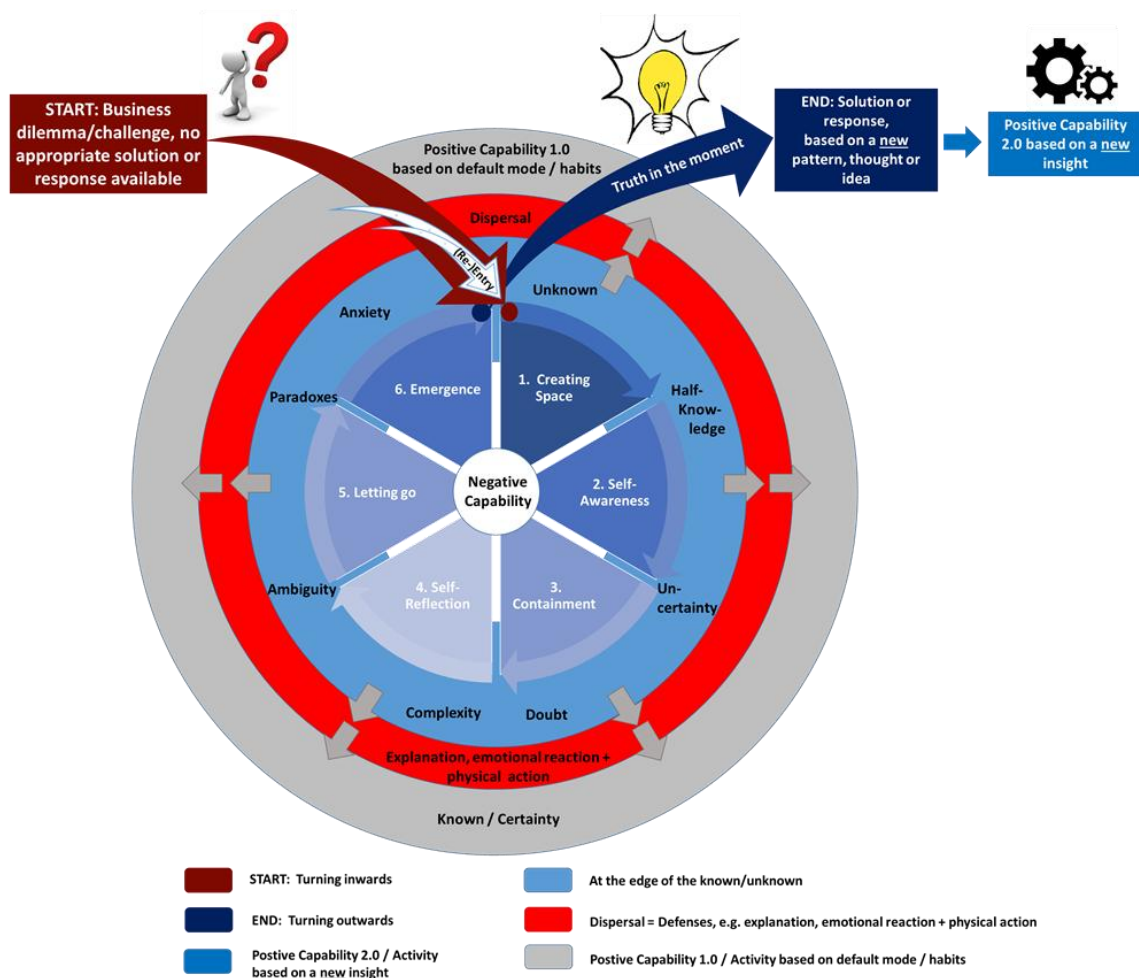
The scholars, who contributed to Negative Capability research in leadership are very limited. Only one case study from Simpson, French and Harvey about leadership in an international joint venture came to my knowledge. In this study, the contribution of Negative Capability in the early stages of a joint venture between three nations and a global corporation is explored (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002).

Therefore the concept of Negative Capability has been hardly tested in the leadership environment, but was discussed on a theoretical level. It is not explored to which extent leaders actually apply Negative Capability or not. To investigate more about the scale of its practice and the potential pitfalls, I developed the “Principle of Negative Capability” based on literature review and observations from my own coaching practice and personal experiences. The principle facilitated the attempt to survey the application of Negative Capability.

4 Introduction of a new Principle of Negative Capability (Annex 1)

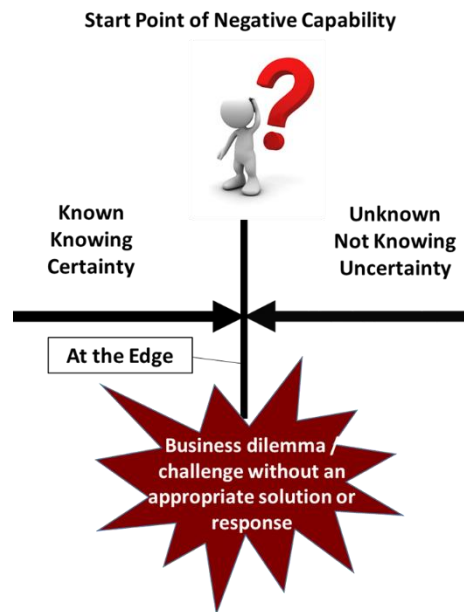
The “Principle of Negative Capability” is an activity process, which consists of six core activities and illustrates the environmental conditions (edge to the unknown, dispersal and Positive Capability) in which Negative Capability operates.

„Principle of Negative Capability“



4.1 Start Point – Business Dilemma / Challenge (Annex 2)

The start point for the application of Negative Capability is, when the leader is facing a business dilemma or (disruptive) challenge and no appropriate response or solution is at hand. At this point, the leader gets in touch with the unknown at the edge between knowing and not knowing and decides to engage with it or not (disperse).



If the leader decides to engage with the unknown, Negative Capability is initiated and he enters the activity cycle of Negative Capability.

The six core activities of the Negative Capability cycle are defined as follows. For practical reasons are female and male leaders addressed in the male form.

4.2 Creating Space

The leader is resisting to react immediately. He is slowing down or even stopping activities to create space and time to enable the next core activities. Examples are having a break, going for a walk, sleeping one or more nights over.

4.3 Self-Awareness

The leader starts observing own thoughts, emotions and body reactions in the present moment. He is becoming aware of the mental, emotional and physical weather system of himself.

4.4 Containment

As soon as the leader got aware of a disturbing emotion of himself or others, he starts absorbing and holding it. He is now experiencing his own emotions on the dancefloor of life and is working with the emotions of others, until they have transformed his emotional weather system and those of others. The leader avoids dispersal (explanation, emotional reaction and physical action) by resisting his inner voice of judgment and not drifting into defensiveness. He is allowing vulnerability of himself and others by tolerating anxiety, uncertainty, doubt, complexity, ambiguity and paradoxes. He is also showing empathy for the emotional turmoil of others.

4.5 Self-Reflection

When the leader's disturbing emotions are fading and have finally changed, he is able to move to the balcony.

He is using the awareness of the experienced emotions and body sensations as a source of information and is demonstrating a detective mind set by inquiring with himself about the underlying issues of his previous emotional turmoil. He may also involve trusted others. The leader is actively questioning, listening, observing and trying to make sense of his own observations and the feedback from others.

This contemplation process facilitates to decipher own (limiting) assumptions, beliefs and perceptions. He is becoming conscious of his own blind spots, which have been out of his awareness so far.

4.6 Letting Go

Only when the leader has the deep wish to overcome the discovered inner barriers, he can step forward into the process of letting go. He needs the courage to accept his own limits and lack of knowledge and knowing. He becomes humble by being aware that not everything can be known.

This way, he is detaching from his limited knowledge and his limiting beliefs. He is not driven by these mechanisms anymore and starting to empty his cup. He resists to fill this newly created space with knowledge acquired from the past.

4.7 Emergence

The leader takes the intent to evolve into the best possible version of himself. He is trusting his own capability to recreate himself, for example in another role or environment. He is demonstrating flexibility by adapting, shifting or adjusting himself. He is fully submitting himself and finally becoming whatever is needed in the present moment for the task at hand (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002).

The process of self-expansion is guided by the question - What wants to be born through me/us right now?

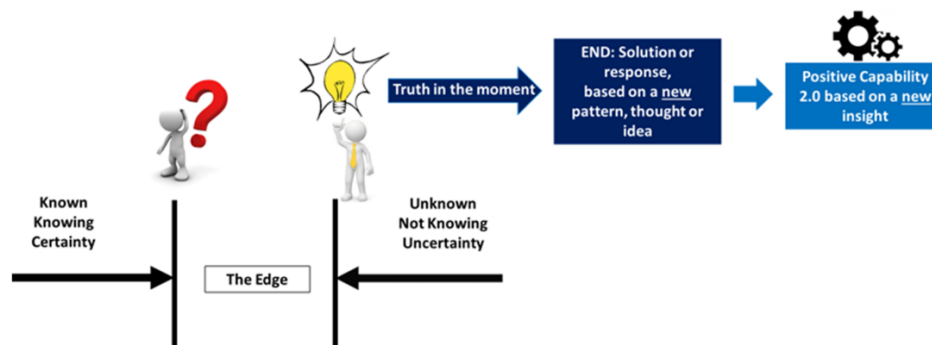
The leader is staying in a state of patient waiting, but vivid receptiveness. Without memory or desire, he completely opens up his mind and heart to the present moment.

He remains open-ended and faithful about the outcome of the emergence process. Playfully he is allowing curiosity, inspiration, imagination and intuition to drive him forward. He is engaging with the truth of the moment, until a new insight arises in his consciousness.

4.8 End Point – Insight (Annex 3)

The end point of Negative Capability is, when a new insight has evolved through the exposure to the truth in the moment (French & Simpson, 1999). This new insight can be transferred into Positive Capability to be implemented.

End Point of Negative Capability



4.9 The Cycle Journey

It has to be noticed, that the leader may drop out of each of the six core activities of Negative Capability during the cycle journey, because of dispersal. To re-enter the process, the leader will have to begin at the start point again.

5 Research Methodology

The main goal of this research study was to identify to what extent leaders apply Negative Capability, when engaging with unknown business situations and which main factors prevent its application.

Because Negative Capability is more of an intrapersonal skill, which cannot be easily observed, qualitative semi-structured interviews with business leaders seemed to be the most practical way to inquire about its application.

During the interviews, also a text reflection from Keats was introduced, to collect additional data about the unconscious bias of the participants. And last, I used myself as an instrument to filter the implicit, unconscious information.

The data was interpreted by applying the thematic analysis method, because Negative Capability research in the context of leadership is an under-researched area. As I additionally had to work with participants, who's views on the topic was not known and reservations were expected, I decided to go with a theoretically flexible approach, which would allow required adjustments.

The contextualist position allowed to acknowledge the way the leaders made meaning of their experience and also how the broader organisational or sometimes even private context impacted that meaning.

All interviews have been transcribed, to support the analysis of the big data set. To identify to what extend the leaders applied Negative Capability in their day to day work, I developed the "The Principle of Negative Capability". It consists of six main themes, which have been introduced as the six Negative Capability core activities. A deductive and latent approach helped to identify underlying assumptions and ideas.

Finally all matching data have been mapped into the defined six main themes. The results of the data analysis were displayed in some thematic graphs, which helped to make patterns visible.

6 Research Setting

6.1 Context

Leadership was chosen as context for this study on Negative Capability, because during my entire professional career in the industry and as a trainer and coach, I have been observing leadership behaviours at all levels. At a certain point, at the edge of knowing and not knowing or certainty and uncertainty, I often recognised a specific change in the displayed leadership behaviour. Some leaders seem to deal with not knowing or uncertainty easier than others, and those, who were able to engage with it, benefited (for themselves, their teams and organisations) from the “Ambiguity Advantage” (Wilkinson, 2006), which is the ability to recognize, explore and profit from ambiguous business situations.

When I came across Negative Capability during the EMCCC program, I realized that the leaders, who were able to handle uncertainty in a more beneficial way, applied Negative Capability. Over time I became more and more excited about the huge potential of Negative Capability for leadership and so the topic and context for this thesis were found.

But I also underwent an intense phase of questioning. If leaders would be willing to contribute to a research study about Negative Capability? Maybe they would not be disposed to give insights on how they deal with unpleasant emotions? However my personal enthusiasm about its potential finally helped me to step forward, to take this risk and start this experiment.

By investigating about applied Negative Capability in leadership, I also had to engage with Negative Capability myself, because I had started a journey to an unknown outcome.

6.2 Access and Selection of Participants

The leaders, who were selected for the interviews, belong to my wider professional network. I have met them on different occasions during my professional career.

I planned to investigate about the application of Negative Capability across different hierarchy levels. Potential contributors, working on hierarchy levels 0 – 4 (chairman to team leader), were chosen.

In total 24 interview requests were sent via E-Mail and 19 male and five female leaders were addressed. To attenuate potential reservations about the term Negative Capability, Reflective Inactivity was introduced as a synonym. Out of the 24, 17 leaders responded to the interview request and agreed to an interview. With 14 leaders, out of 17, an interview was conducted finally.

From the three leaders, who agreed to an interview, which did not happen, one leader (level 1) cancelled the interview due to important business reasons a week in advance. Another female leader (level 3) proposed to schedule the interview after her vacation. Unfortunately one week after the deadline, which was given for all interviews. The third leader (level 4) proposed dates on too short notice.

6.3 Demographics of Participants (Annex 4)

The 14 actual interview partners consist of ten male and four female leaders.

They come from different industries. Two participants belong to consulting and one respectively comes from food & bio tec., banking, glass production, insurance, energy and software development. The remaining six participants are related to information technology, telecommunication & cable operating, making this sector a key industry in this research study.

One leader operates on hierarchy level 0 (chairman), two on level 1 (general management), five on level 2 (division head), four on level 3 (department head) and two on level 4 (team leader).

The age range is between 41 to 55 years.

The nationalities are composed of 12 Germans, one Croatian and one Austrian.

12 participants are based in Germany and two in Switzerland.

Two leaders hold a PhD, two a MBA, five a university degree in business economics, three in engineering, one in macroeconomics and an additional one has a university degree in engineering and business economics.

Five participants regularly contemplate. Two participants stated that they meditate, one is engaged in autogenous training, one in reiki and another one in qigong.

One participant reported about a burnout a few years back and two participants experienced a company merger recently.

7 Data Gathering (Annex 5)

All scheduled interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

They took place either in the participant's office, at public places like restaurants or cafes or via Skype, depending on the preference and availability of the participant.

Because Negative Capability is not a wide spread concept, all interviews started with the question, if they have ever heard about Negative Capability or Reflective Inactivity. Followed by questions what they think, what it means and what they associate with the terms.

Then Keats' original definition of Negative Capability and my own definition about Reflective Inactivity were shared. In my definition of Reflective Inactivity Keats implicit intention of the use of Negative Capability, to generate fresh and genius insight, was made more explicit.

Additionally, some reasons why Negative Capability is regarded as a very fundamental leadership capacity were shared by referring to the increased uncertainty created by the VUCA environment (Johansen & Euchner, 2013) and by explaining about Scharmer's idea of leading from an emerging future (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

Afterwards, the participants were asked about their impressions, if they find Negative Capability important and if they could share one or more examples of its application.

The participants were also questioned about what works well for them when applying Negative Capability and what not.

In all interviews, except in one, where we did not come thus far, a reflection from Keats about a flower and a bee(hive) was used to engage with the unconscious perceptions and predispositions of the participants. In the flower & bee reflection, the flower is related to Negative Capability and the bee to Positive Capability.

Questions about ideation, innovation, learning, experimenting and how mistakes are handled by their organisations were asked to inquire if the cultural conditions, in which the leaders operate, support the application of Negative Capability.

Almost at the end of the interview, the sharing of an outstanding learning experience, that personally transformed the participants, was requested.

The final question was, if they would like to learn more about Negative Capability.

A brief summary of the interview core questions, the used definitions about Negative Capability and Reflective Inactivity, as well as the flower & bee reflection exercise, is enclosed in Annex 5.

It is important to note that in the first four interviews a more structured set of questions was used, aiming at a very detailed examination of how the Negative Capability core activities were applied. But this strict framework seemed to disturb the natural flow of the conversations. As a consequence the change to a smaller and more open set of core questions (Annex 5), as previously described, was determined.

Additionally, it was decided to allow potential sideways for the remaining ten participants and to use this input as additional information to understand better their personal way of engaging with Negative Capability or to decipher potential dispersal routes.

The “Principle of Negative Capability” (Annex 1) was also introduced and explained as of participant number five, because the first four participants had not heard before about Negative Capability, but wanted to learn more about it.

Keats’ and my own definition of Negative Capability / Reflective Inactivity, which were used so far, hadn’t been sufficient to meet their thirst for knowledge, which might also be seen as a defence or dispersal from being in touch with the unknown or uncertainty.

In any case it was decided to use the “Principle of Negative Capability” as a way to make participants familiar with the concept. This formed the basis for the following discussions, where they could share their personal opinions and refer to examples and experiences right away.

Because I also used myself as an instrument, notes were taken after every interview. What arose within me during the different phases of the conversations was used as additional source of information.

All interviews were conducted in German language. They also were recorded and transcribed.

8 Results

8.1 Awareness Level for Negative Capability

All 14 participants reported that they had never heard about Negative Capability or Reflective Inactivity before the interview request. Four participants shared that they googled both terms, but could not derive much from the limited information available.

8.2 Thoughts and Associations about Negative Capability

Because all 14 participants were not familiar with Negative Capability, their preconceived opinions and unconscious positions related to the term, were investigated:

- Four participants thought that due to Negative Capability, certain capabilities cannot be accessed. Which might affect oneself and others negatively.
- Three participants thought Negative Capability is about the absence of a capability.
- Additional three participants shared difficulties to relate to the term, because of the emphasis on the negative.
- Two participants thought that Negative Capability might be a capability that is perceived as negative by others.
- One participant explained it as taking a capability to its extremes.
- Another participant guessed that it is most likely not an inability.

In contrast, Reflective Inactivity was regarded by the participants as follows:

- Six participants spoke about a pause, breakaway, withdrawal or retreat from daily hectic to do nothing, think freely or reflect, also about themselves.
- Four participants associated with Reflective Inactivity not to react immediately, or blindly when under pressure, but to think first and to act later.
- One participant referred not to take a decision and how this could be communicated successfully to the team to it.

- Another participant questioned what the consequences of doing nothing might be?
- An additional participant associated that Reflective Inactivity describes a highly self-aware and self-reflective leader, who takes himself less serious and is therefore able to fully concentrate on people management.
- For one participant, Reflective Inactivity also had a negative touch and was related to a problem area.

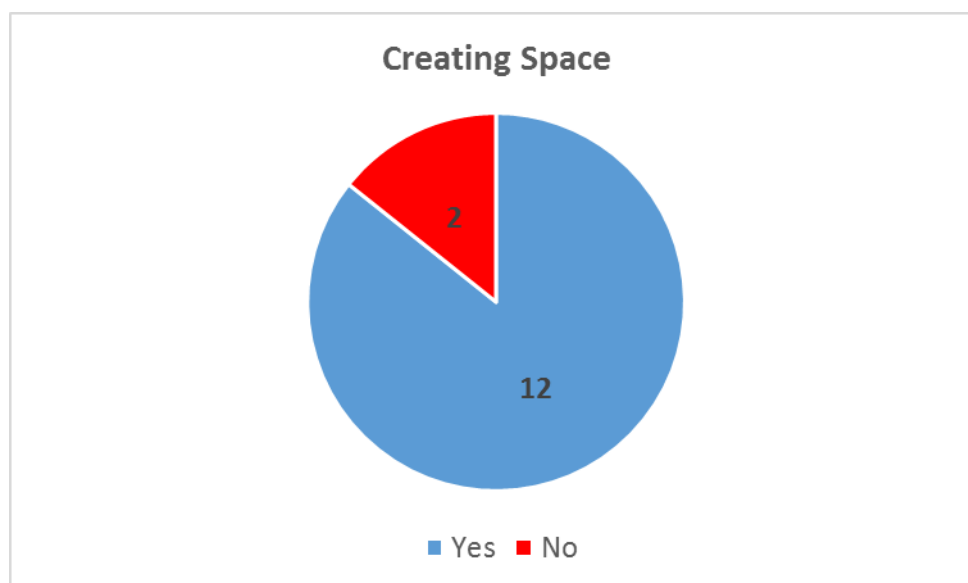
In summary 13 participants associated negative aspects or effects with Negative Capability while only one participant thought negatively about Reflective Inactivity.

8.3 Negative Capability Application Study Results

To assess if the participants actually practice Negative Capability and to what extent, the “The Principle of Negative Capability” and the definitions of the Negative Capability core activities were used to map the content of all interviews.

8.3.1 Creating Space

12 participants, out of 14, stated that they take time to think about difficult business situations or they regularly engage with them while practising mediation or exercising.



Out of the 12 participants, who were engaged with creating space:

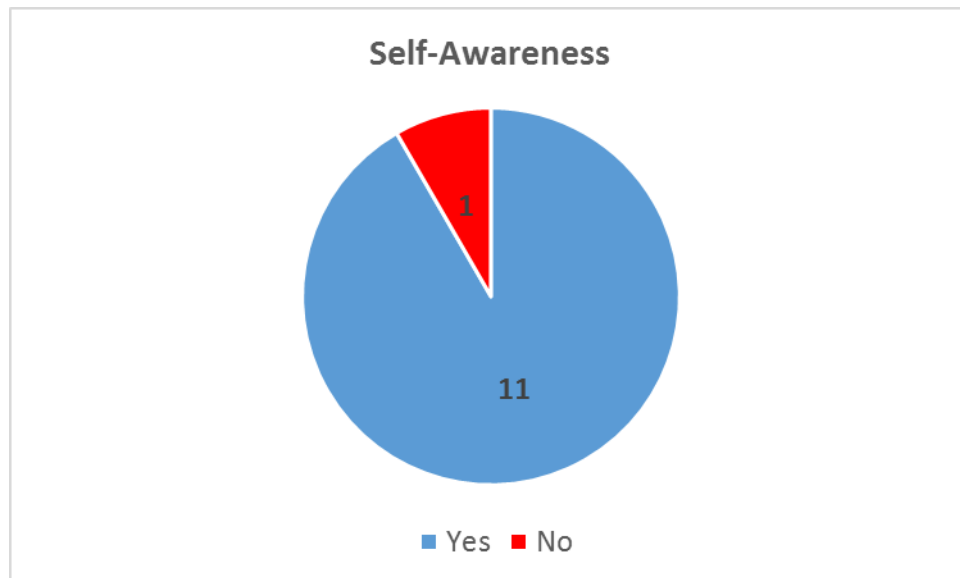
- Seven participants shared when facing business challenges, they try to slow down, wait, let things settle, request additional time for inquiry or think issues well through, without deciding about solutions right away.
- Two participants mentioned that taking time is important, but can be very difficult, if there is high pressure from the senior management, because of time critical issues or high priority tasks. For them, waiting always increases the pressure on themselves, while taking decisions creates comfort, especially when a high number of stakeholders depend on the decision.
- One participant shared that before he takes difficult decisions, he walks around the lake close by the office.
- Another participant mentioned that he regularly blocks his calendar and leaves the office.

Two participants did not manage to create any space:

- One participant regarded himself as a very active personality, who prefers a fast pace and cannot resonate with being “passive”. During the entire interview it was also noticed that he mainly talked about what must be done, therefore it is doubted that he is slowing down much to reflect, because he prefers to be active.
- The other participant shared openly, because of a reorganisation and his recently expanded responsibilities, he is not taking any time to reflect about his tasks, his job or himself at this point in time. He works 70 – 80 hours per week in a very dynamic and complex environment, but is very aware and willing to reduce hours to take time for reflection in the near future.

8.3.2 Self-Awareness

Out of the 12 leaders practising the first core activity, creating space, only 11 participants practise the second core activity, self-awareness.



During the interviews three different groups were observed:

- One group, seven participants out of 12, shared a lot about emotions and thoughts and allowed a deep look into their emotional world. To this group belong all four female leaders and some of the male leaders.
- The second group, four participants out of 12, did not speak much about emotions, but their self-awareness came across through their shared examples and thoughts.
- Only one participant shared that he does not observe his emotions and body reactions, but he is convinced that it is very important. This participant also shared that he got almost furious in a leadership seminar, when he was asked several times about how he “feels” now.

When looking deeper into the group of the four female leaders, who shared much of their inner life, the following was found:

- One senior professional talked about being very aware about her frustration, when working with alpha type managers in the senior leadership team.

- Another participant, who had a burnout a few years back and experienced a company merger recently, shared her feelings of emptiness and fear about her professional future and was very aware that these emotions and thoughts are a repeating pattern.
- Another leader stated that she observes very closely her emotions, when dealing with difficult business situations. She is also very sensitive about her impulses and trusts her gut feeling.
- One participant reported that she was very shocked and sad after receiving negative feedback from an employee survey. She personally did not feel seen or understood by her staff.

The three male leaders, who were very communicative about their inner life, shared the following:

- One leader stated that whenever he had to deal with a challenge, his first reaction was an emotional one. He observed very closely that he became angry, because an issue had popped up, which then shifted into feelings of being attacked and threatened.
- An additional participant reported he does not only concentrate on emotions, but also on body reactions and thoughts to arrive at a holistic view about himself. This participant also shared moments of uncertainty, confusion and the experiences of powerlessness, when he had a series of difficult conversations with his supervisor. He usually practises mindfulness ("The bell of mindfulness" from Buddhism) and meditates regularly.
- One leader came across as a very sensitive person and shared that he pays special attention to his body sensations and reactions.

Four male participants did not share in detail how they practise self-awareness, but they do it:

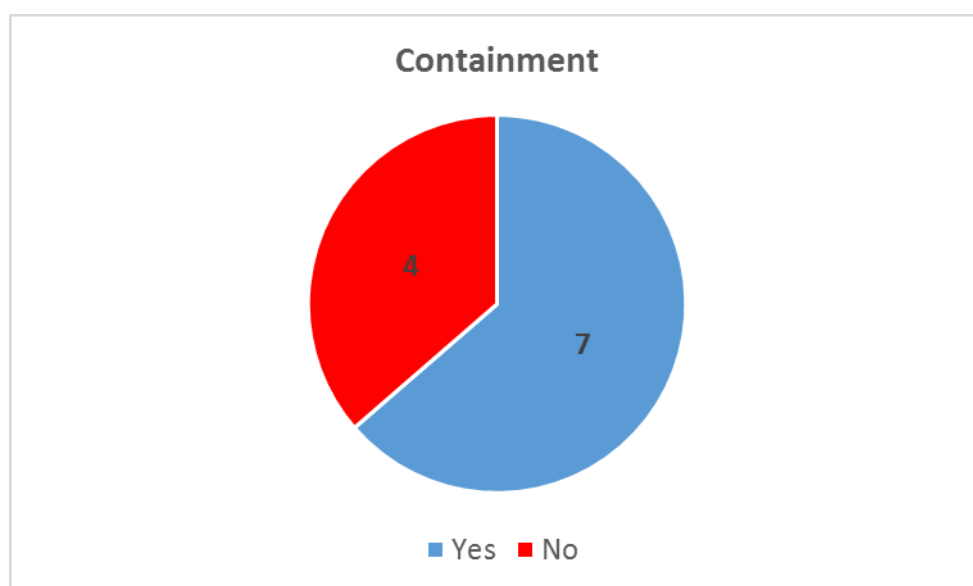
- One stated that he experiences thoughts, emotions and body reactions fast as a lightening.
- The second participant shared that due to his business education, he tries to approach issues as unemotional as possible, but this does not work always,

because we are all humans. Therefore he works with his emotions and pays attention to his thoughts. He also regards himself as a person, who is not 100% controlled.

- The third participant stated that he needs phases to assimilate experiences and he demonstrated a high level of empathy for his employees.
- The fourth participant shared that he always tries to find the causality between the problems and emotions, he struggles with.

8.3.3 Containment

Seven participants, out of the 11 self-aware participants, also practise the third core activity and contain their own unpleasant emotions and the emotional turmoil of others.



Some impressions from the seven participants, who were able to contain, are shared below:

- One female participant mentioned that the alphas in her senior management team do not like ambiguity and that they create their own realities and truth. That is why she regularly has to contain her own ambiguity and frustration when working with these personalities. On one hand she prefers more to work

with highly reflective people, but on the other hand she also wants to perform well in her role.

- Another female participant stated, while she was preparing input for a decision, the instructions from her supervisor and her supervisor's boss were very different. Also the stakeholders demonstrated a different interest. That is why she asked for more time and decided not to arrive at overhasty conclusions, but to cope with the pressure. She also admitted, that being patient is sometimes difficult for her, especially if she has no idea what to do. At this point she must force herself to remain patient, because the temptation to become prematurely active and get rid of the unpleasant emotions for a while, is given.
- One male participant shared that if the pressure is high to take a decision and he is not ready for it, he usually explains why a decision cannot be taken yet and what information is missing. This helps him to deal with the pressure.
- Another male participant explained how he contains his employees by creating a safe space and climate where they feel seen, listened to, supported and part of strong team.
- An additional male participant stated that he is very good in bearing up pressure and regards it as his strength and weakness, in case he contains too many things. He also explained, that he can deal with grey zones well and supports others in dealing with pressure to react or decide fast.
- One participant admitted that in situations with his teenager kids, he might react highly emotional. In the business context however, when he has to deliver bad news, he does it in a direct and open way and tries to contain the impacted person. He pays high attention to fairness and is empathetic even if he is very straightforward. He confessed that acting out his own emotions did himself good, for example hitting on the table or allowing feelings of disappointment.
- One participant shared that for all important business issues, his company takes enough time and does not decide prematurely. He then contains the pressure. He also shared when he voluntarily stepped down as CEO in 2013,

he worked one year for his successor. During that year he learned how employees feel, when they depend on decisions of their supervisor.

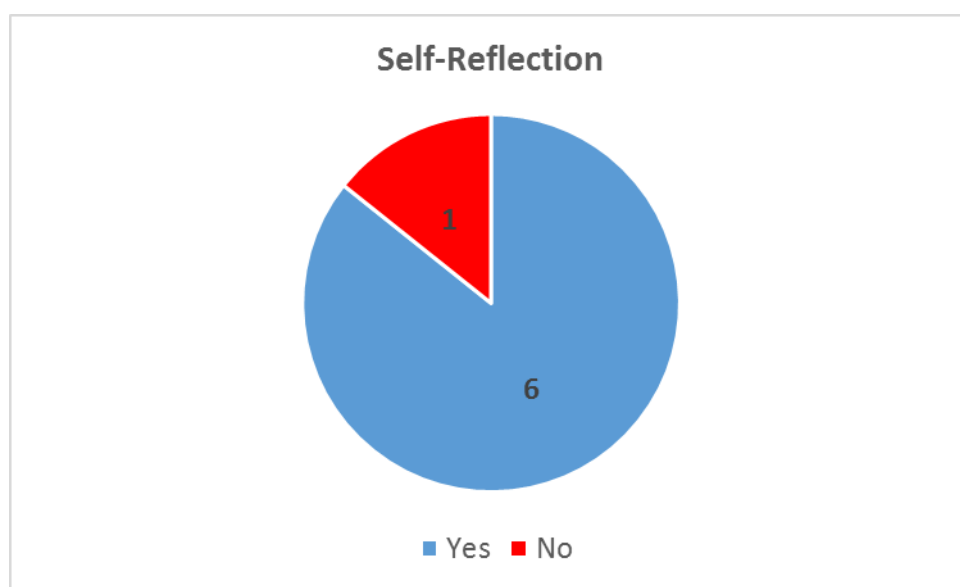
Four participants could not contain themselves and dispersed in the following ways:

- One participant shared that if she cannot understand, what is going on, the arising emotions are hard for her to contain. Due to the recent company merger she feels that a new world is coming, but she cannot grasp it. She also stated that she sometimes lacks faith in god and complained about the current company culture. She sometimes tends to fall into an activity trap by defending herself, doing something or trying to fill knowledge gaps, just to remain an attractive employee for the company. She also shared that she is always prepared to look after herself, because she feels trust is not helpful anymore. Tears rolled down her face during the interview.
- Another participant stated that despite she felt that something is going on, after receiving negative feedback from an employee survey, she does not engage with her emotions, because she is convinced that things have to be in a particular way. Additionally she admitted that she does not always want to see the emotions that are created within her. She shared that she lacks comprehension and is only selectively willing to take the feedback from her employees. She stated that the poor feedback for the entire leadership team must have impacted her feedback as well. She never felt that her employees are that much dissatisfied, and certainly not with her. Her requested behaviour change has been discussed with her team and now she is looking after tools to find a systematic approach to "manage" it.
- One participant shared that whenever he received an unpleasant information, he immediately needed to talk to someone (secretary, CFO or someone else). The only thing he needed at this point in time was an ear, someone, who would listen to him, so that he could "let go of it".
- One leader explained about his containment that he tends to become like a machine and works with checklists. He also mentioned that he used to put pressure on himself in addition to the expectations from his environment. This led to the fact that he did not dare to polarise anymore. But this is highly important for his current role. He also concluded, that you can never satisfy

everyone, how perfect you may try to be. That is why he decided to invest more in his PR element. Steve Jobs became his role model. Too much reflection pulls him down. That is why he should not overdo it.

8.3.4 Self-Reflection

Six participants, out of seven leaders, who were able to apply the third Negative Capability core activity, containment, engaged also with self-reflection.



Below are some statements, which the participants shared on how they practice self-reflection:

- One female participant shared that she likes to work with reflective people a lot, because it is much more interesting for her. On the other hand she is convinced, that the industry does not exist to find the best human beings. Business looks for special capabilities. In her organisation, they are looking for the skill to take fast decisions in senior positions. From her point of view, relatively many intelligent people with the ability to reflect, can be found on the labour market, but only few of them can reflect and take decisions. She also stated that she works in HR, because her personality fits better into a supporting function.

- One male participant stated that he usually takes decisions based on what he perceives from his environment and how comfortable he feels with a particular decision. He also declared that he usually spends a lot of time on reflection to find an appropriate solution.
- One female participant mentioned that to listen very carefully is what she learned from the contradicting views of stakeholders. No one is neutral, even she is not. All stakeholders have their own motivating factors, which lead to different perspectives. So she arrived at the insight, that she will not be able to present one "objective" view, but she could make the different perspectives and motives transparent. Additionally she sometimes realises quickly if the obtained feedback is useful or not. She believes that both is required, self-reflection (inside) and reflection or feedback from others (outside). But her base for taking decisions is to wait and observe her emotions.
- One male leader stated that for him a good criteria for taking decisions is clarity. He shared that if the head/thinking and gut/heart/feeling point to different directions and a decision is taken nevertheless, doubt and the loss of energy will be the consequence, because of the inner conflict. If head and heart are aligned, he arrives at a particular clarity and the decision will be a great one. He also shared an example of how he tried to find a blind spot by asking his direct reports for their feedback. By doing this, he was watching out for a particular blind spot to improve the conversation with his supervisor.
- One male leader regarded challenging himself and situations, as one of the most important tasks for managers. But if a manager is willing to change and has the capacity to challenge himself, is a different story for him. He believes he reflects regularly, but mainly after transitions. Then he questions himself, was it a good step, can he adjust, can he relate to the people and is it what he really wants. He shared in view of business decisions that it might be valuable to take more time to analyse and understand the issues at hand, but as manager he is evaluated how good and fast he takes decisions.
- Another leader stated that he prefers to be out of the fire line on a regular basis, because he needs space for his personal development. In the company he has introduced democratic decision making processes to involve more

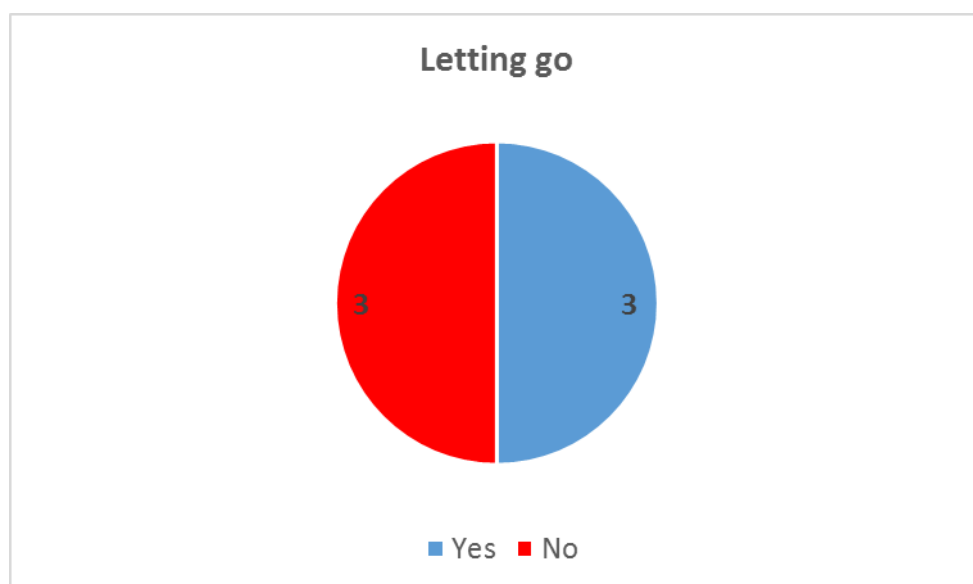
employees, who have different ideas and views. With these democratic processes they enforce enough time for important decisions (strategy, goals, new hires, merger, opening or closing down a business unit).

One single leader was unable to practice self-reflection, because of dispersal:

- This leader admitted honestly that he very often knows upfront, how things are and can be solved. He sees himself as being very stubborn, if he is convinced of something, and is not able to take a different perspective.

8.3.5 Letting Go

Three participants, out of six, who were able to apply self-reflection, engaged also with the fifth core activity the letting go of assumptions, knowledge and knowing. They were able to embrace uncertainty.



The three participants explained how they let go:

- One female participant shared that in her first leadership position, she had not much expertise, so she had to make herself comfortable with not knowing. She stated you can never know everything. Additionally she demonstrated a

high flexibility how she stepped into different roles in her career. In the business context, she pointed out, having a strategy in place, which should be pursued, is highly important. Patience is required to follow the strategy and flexibility to adapt the strategy, if things do not work out as intended.

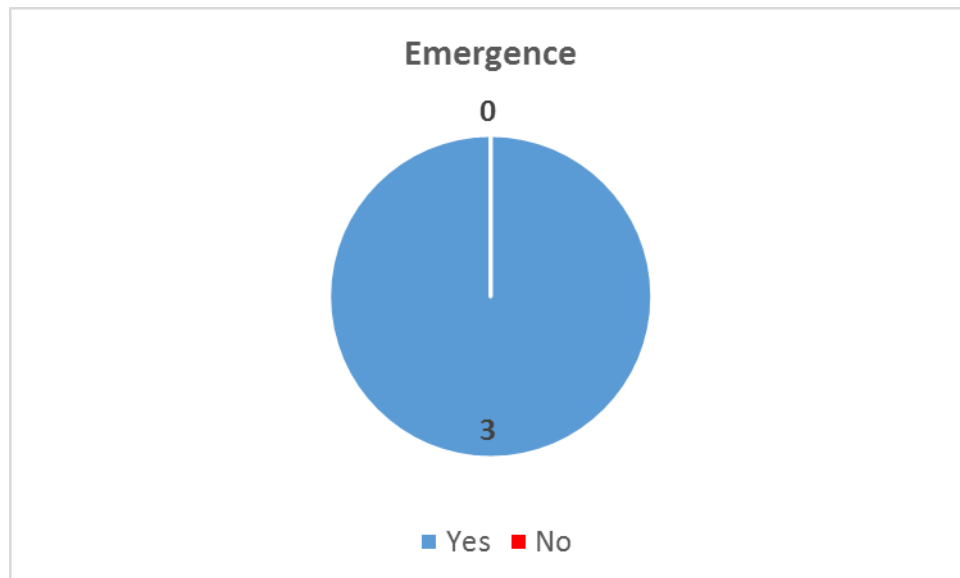
- One male leader stated that he wants to make a difference by doing his job very well. To achieve his goal, he is highly flexible in his approach. That is why he comes across as a chameleon leader. He also recommended once the liquidation of his position, is in the global talent pool of his company and very humble in view of his competencies.
- The second male participant stepped down as CEO in 2013 after the start-up phase of his company was finished. He shared his thoughts that the company would benefit more from a different leadership style, which underpinned also his flexibility of character.

Three participants were not able to engage with letting go:

- One female leader shared that she believes that all successful organisations work in the same way, which cannot be changed. By holding on to this belief, she was not able to allow the emergence of the idea, that there might be different and better ways of working available.
- One male leader always had to have the last word and tried to find a smart answer for every question. He was perceived as very knowledgeable, but seemed to fill every space with his acquired knowledge from the past. That is why it was suspected that he might not be able to wonder at all.
- Another male participant recently transferred from a senior management position at a large global corporation to a start-up company. He shared when facing an unknown situation, he tries to figure out what he does not know and imagines scenarios. He also stated that as a manager he is educated to know, to do and to take decisions, which implies that he is using his knowledge in difficult situations to fight the unknown.

8.3.6 Emergence

Three participants, out of the three leaders with the capability to let go, were also able to engage with emergence, the sixth and last core activity.



These participants shared how they apply emergence:

- The female participant shared that in her life, she recognised it is occasionally better to keep an experience inside and not to share it with others immediately, because she finds answers also by herself. She sometimes feels like in the famous animated cartoon “Wicki - the little Viking”, and receives a sudden impulse/idea after a phase of being very open and receptive.
- One male leader explained that he trusts his intuition and pointed out that following an intuition, does not mean to be blind. He usually sets an intent of what he wants to achieve as an outcome, when dealing with a tricky situation. Then he tries to be very open to the impulses from around him and trusts that the idea of how to get there, will come when the time is right.
- An additional male participant mentioned after he had stepped down as CEO, he worked one year for his successor and allowed the emergence of his new role. Collective decision making processes for important business decisions

were also implemented in the company. This demonstrates a collective culture in the organisation to allow the emergence of sustainable business solutions.

8.4 Unconscious Bias for Positive or Negative Capability

An original text excerpt from Keats, in which he reflected about a flower and a bee, was used to investigate the unconscious bias for Positive or Negative Capability of the participants (Annex 5).

In total 13 participants, out of 14, were asked about what resonates for them in the text. With one participant the interview time expired before the reflection could be introduced.

In this reflection exercise, the bee is related to Positive Capability while the flower is related to Negative Capability.

Seven participants resonated right away with the bee and shared that they prefer to be more active. They stated being passive, like the flower, may not work in the business environment, because passivity does endanger survival.

Out of these seven participants:

- One participant did not apply creating space.
- Another participant did apply creating space, but not self-awareness.
- Four participants were able to create space, apply self-awareness, but were unable to contain.
- One participant was able to move to self-reflection, but was unable to let go.

Only one male participant resonated with the flower. His explanation was, that he has a high interest to arrive at sustainable solutions and regards it as important to remain open. This participant was able to exercise all Negative Capability core activities including self-reflection. He was not able to apply the steps letting go and emergence.

Five participants resonated with both and three of them shared that depending on the situation or circumstances, they are the flower or the bee. All five participants were able to deal with the potential ambiguity and the paradoxes represented by the flower and the bee. They also took different viewpoints without rushing too fast into any

conclusion. These participants were able to apply more Negative Capability core activities than those, who related with the bees only:

- Three participants applied all six Negative Capability core activities.
- One participant practised creating space, self-awareness and containment, but was unable to stay in the stage of self-reflection.
- Another participant did not engage with creating space, due to his current business situation, but is highly aware that things have to change. He related to the flower and bee and seems to have the full potential to exercise more Negative Capability core activities.

9 Findings and Discussion

9.1 Awareness, Thoughts and Associations about Negative Capability

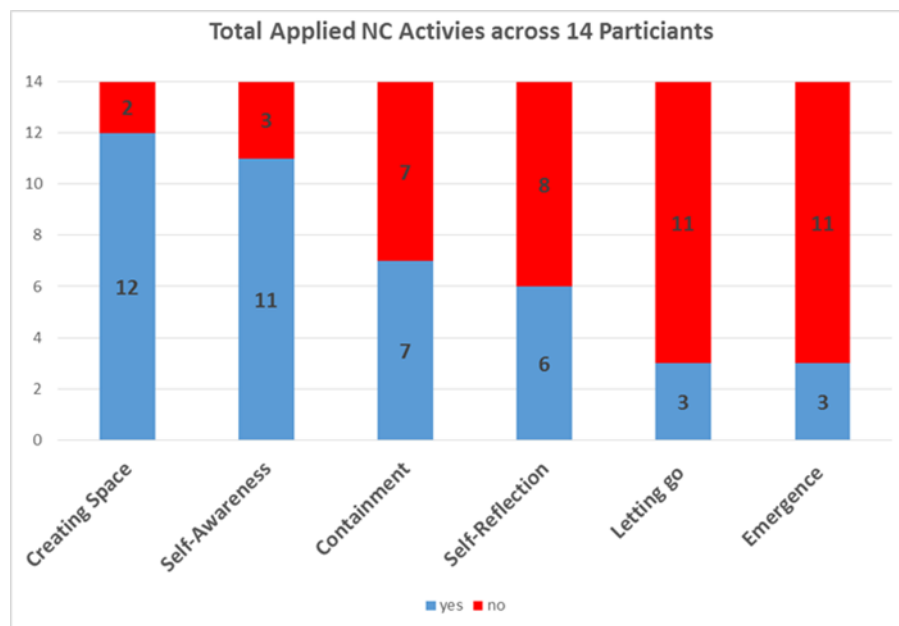
Surprisingly not one participant had ever heard about Negative Capability before. The term Negative Capability led to the fact, that the vast majority of the leaders associated either negative aspects or negative effects on oneself or others with it.

Bion's detection that we tend to exclude "what we don't want to see or hear" (French, 2001: 486) might be a strong reason for the non-existent awareness of Negative Capability leading to its underrepresented status in leadership.

My own assumption, that Negative Capability might be perceived as highly negative, was confirmed by all 14 participants during the interviews. The introduction of Reflective Inactivity as a synonym seemed to have functioned as a door opener in 13 interviews. Only one participant felt negative for both terms, but our previous trustful working relationship balanced his concerns.

9.2 The Three Main Application Challenges for Participants

The following graph shows, which of the Negative Capability core activities were applied by the 14 participants or not.



As expected, not every leader was able to apply the whole cycle of the six core activities.

Three main challenging Negative Capability core activities were identified:

1. Creating Space:

- 14% of the participants (2 leaders) were unable to create any space.

2. Containment:

- 50% of the participants (7 leaders) were unable to contain.

3. Letting go:

- 79% of the participants (11 leaders) were unable to let go.

What is getting visible in the above graph is, that the decrease of the number of applying participants is not a linear one. The decline happens more in steps. It appears, that if the leaders passed one of the three hurdles above, they automatically seemed to apply the next core activity also.

The investigation of the drop off dynamics at these three hurdles leads to the following results:

1. Creating Space:

- 14% of the participants (2 out of 14 leaders) were unable to create any space. These two leaders were so much engaged in their day to day activities, that they were not even able or willing to create some time or space for a thinking pause.
- 92% of the leaders (11 out of 12) automatically used the created space to become self-aware. While having a pause from their external activities, they turned inwards and got aware of their thoughts, emotions and body sensations.

2. Containment:

- 36% of the participants (4 out of 11 leaders), who applied self-awareness and got in touch with their thoughts and emotions, could not contain their own unpleasant feelings or those of others. They judged themselves or others and dispersed in explanation, emotional reaction or physical action in the external world.

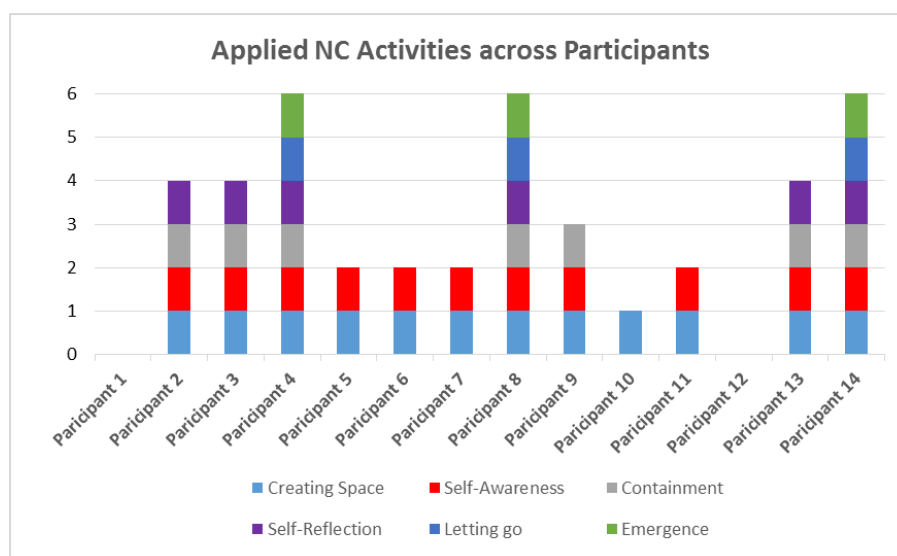
- 86% of the leaders (6 out of 7) who were able to contain unpleasant feelings until they changed, automatically started the process of self-reflection.

3. Letting go:

- 50% of the participants (3 out of 6 leaders) applied self-reflection, but were unable to detach themselves from their knowledge and assumptions. These three leaders immediately started to apply knowledge or solutions from the past or were (unconsciously) holding on to strong beliefs, like “this is how the industry works”.
- 100% of the leaders (3 out of 3) who were able to let go of past knowledge, assumptions or personal needs, got empty and were also able to patiently wait for an idea to emerge. This new idea or vision was then a great motivation to get active again and move into Positive Capability 2.0.

9.3 The All-Rounders

Only 21% of participants (3 out of 14), were able to exercise the full spectrum of all six Negative Capability core activities.



What do these participants (number 4, 8 and 14) have in common?

1. No firm attachment to their working identity

During the whole interview it became obvious, that these participants have a more flexible working identity. All of them had experienced major transitions in their life. One leader went through her process of a long maternity leave and came back into a completely changed organisation. The second leader voluntarily stepped down from his CEO position, because he realised that for the continuous growth of the company, other leadership capabilities, which he does not possess, are needed. The third leader decided recently to step into a completely unknown future. He will soon leave the company and his teams to create space for preparing the foundation of a start-up, which makes a difference to the world.

They all seemed to have worked on their basic assumptions and arrived at different perspectives about what is desirable and possible in their lives (Ibarra, 2004). That is why, they displayed a calm detachment from their identity as leader without losing engagement.

2. A curious, open and flexible mind-set

All three participants seem to embrace not knowing with curiosity and patience while mastering their memories and desires to remain open and available for the new. They could also relate to the flower (receptiveness) and the bee (activity) in Keats' reflection. Depending on the situation, they preferred to be the one or the other, which underlines their flexibility.

3. High self-awareness and great empathy

In the interviews they came across as being highly self-aware and empathic. They used their own feelings or the emotions from people in their environment as information for their reflections. That is why they take very conscious, well contemplated decisions. These decisions are more driven by what they would love to create, to improve the current situation, rather than what they would like to avoid. Additionally they demonstrated trust in their personal capabilities, but with a humble awareness that not everything can be known.

4. Intuitive application of Negative Capability

These participants applied Negative Capability intuitively without any detailed knowledge about the concept. What might have supported their intuitive approach, was that all three leaders regard the common well-being higher than their individual self-interest.

9.4 Negative Capability and Hierarchy Level

The three Negative Capability all-rounders were found at all hierarchical layers. The numerical biggest group, which could exercise three to four Negative Capability core activities was found on layer 2 and 3, but that can be explained by the higher number of layer 2 leaders, who have been interviewed.

It seems that hierarchy level is not a barrier to apply Negative Capability.

	NC 0	NC 1-2	NC 3-4	NC 6
Layer 0 - 1: (3)	1	1	0	1
Layer 2 - 3: (9)	1	3	4	1
Layer 4: (2)	0	1	0	1

9.5 Negative Capability and Gender

A significant correlation between the Negative Capability application and gender was not found. But it must be noticed, that at least all female leaders were able to create space and apply at least two Negative Capability core activities.

	NC 0	NC 1-2	NC 3-4	NC 6
Male (10)	2	3	3	2
Female (4)	0	2	1	1

9.6 Negative Capability and Age

The Negative Capability all-rounders came from the younger age groups, 41 to 45 years and 46 to 49 years.

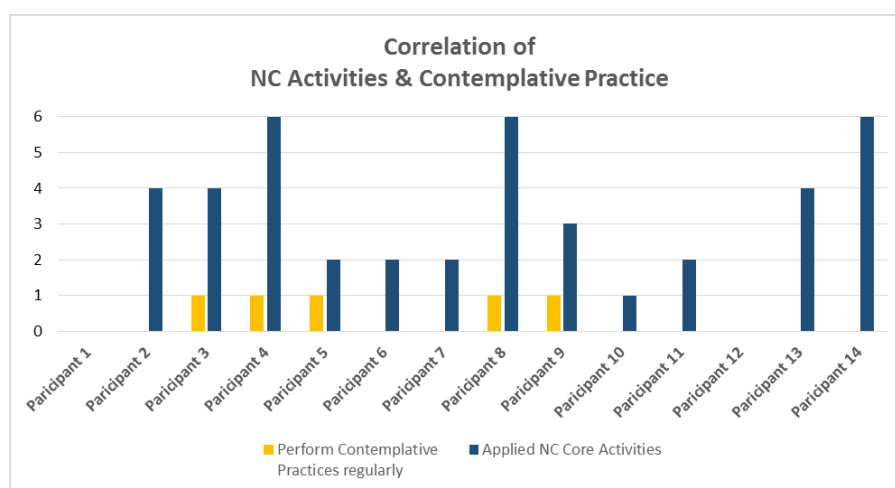
Participants from the youngest age group, 41 to 45 years, applied Negative Capability the most. They all engaged with it and even 50% of them have been leaders, who applied all six core activities.

In the eldest age group, above or equal to 50 years, zero participants applied all Negative Capability core activities or none.

	NC 0	NC 1-2	NC 3-4	NC 6
Age >= 50: (5)	0	3	2	0
Age 46 - 49: (5)	2	0	2	1
Age 41 - 45: (4)	0	2	0	2

There might be a trend, that younger leaders, who maybe grew up in a world with a more liberated mind-set, are better positioned to apply Negative Capability.

9.7 Negative Capability and Contemplative Practice



Only 5 participants of the 14 interviewed leaders are seriously and regularly engaged in contemplative practices (meditation, autogenous training, reiki and qigong).

	NC 0	NC 1-2	NC 3-4	NC 6
Yes (5)	0%	20%	40%	40%
No (9)	22%	44%	22%	11%

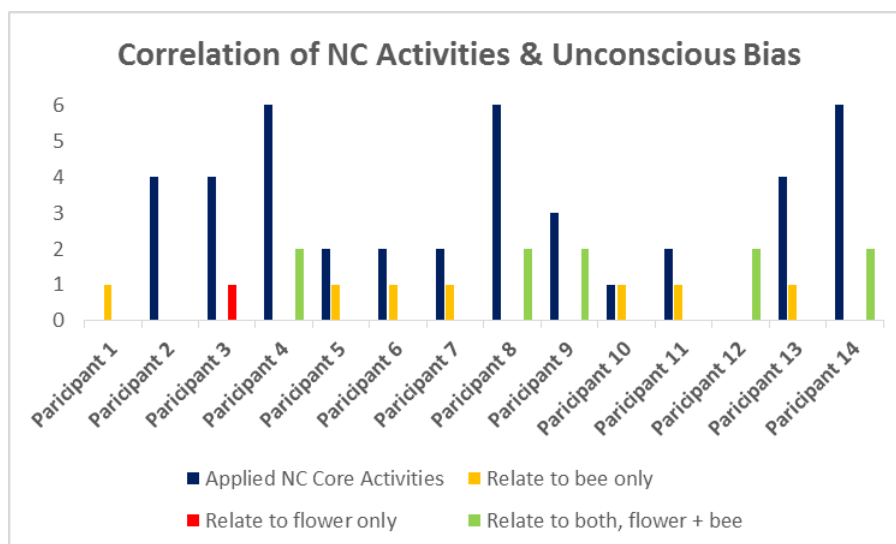
A two third majority of the 9 non-practitioners can be found in the lower scores of Negative Capability.

But 80% of the leaders, who regularly engage in any kind of contemplative exercises, score high in applying Negative Capability.

Therefore there seems to be an indication for a correlation between seriously practised contemplation and the ability to apply most of the six core activities of Negative Capability.

9.8 Negative Capability and Unconscious Bias

In Keats' reflection about a flower and a bee, the flower is related to Negative Capability and the bee to Positive Capability.



Seven participants, out of 13, who gave an indication, preferred to be more active and resonated with the bee. The majority of the bee participants can be found in the

lower scores of Negative Capability. These participants shared the belief, that a flower cannot survive long in the business environment.

The remaining six participants, who related to the flower or both, scored significantly higher in Negative Capability. At least they applied creating space, self-awareness and containment or demonstrated the potential for it (participant 12). This might result from their unconscious bias for being receptive. These participants shared in the interview that they observe much unproductive bustle in their organisations.

9.9 Tensions and Dispersal during the Interviews

All 14 participants agreed to an interview about a subject, they had never encountered before and with which they associated negative qualities. As a consequence everybody got in touch with uncertainty, the unknown and its underlying emotions.

Given that the edge between the known and the unknown can be exciting, but also “unsettling and anxiety-provoking”, because it might “inspire a sense of incompetence, fear and loss of control, and can obliterate all sense of role and identity of the task in hand” (French & Simpson, 1999: 3), I was highly alert before, during and after the interview to use myself as an instrument to collect additional information.

In six interviews, out of 14, I felt unsettled in lieu of the participants. In these interviews a particular openness for the topic was demonstrated, but the underlying motivation was a different one.

These six interviews had the following characteristics:

1. Self-marketing:

Three participants were more interested how they were perceived, rather than in the topic itself. They shared their success stories to leave a good impression. They did not engage with creating space or left the Negative Capability core activities cycle right after self-awareness.

In case these leaders did not follow the self-marketing approach during a phase of the interview, they changed their strategy and started technical discussions and joined the group below.

2. Technical discussions:

Four participants engaged with Negative Capability more on a technical level rather than on an emotional layer. They shared detailed information on brainstorming, innovation labs, task forces, learning expeditions and processes & procedures. Their reflections got stuck on the intellectual level. These participants were highly engaged with explaining and applying their knowledge and were hardly able to create space or become self-aware.

3. Warning - Alphas do not see any value in Negative Capability:

One participant shared her concern that alpha type leaders do not like ambiguity and will therefore never engage in Negative Capability. The warning was given to “protect” me. I should never share the “Negative Capability Principle” with them, because they will not recognise any value in it and regard it as a waste of time. She personally applied the Negative Capability cycle up to self-reflection.

4. Need for containment:

One participant was unable to contain herself. She had a strong need to be contained during the interview. She shared all her fears and frustration and burst out in tears. This person quit the Negative Capability cycle after self-awareness and before containment.

All the above mentioned interviews are a strong indication for the dispersal of the participants from the conversation about Negative Capability and their own vulnerability.

An unconscious “sense of incompetence, fear and loss of control” (French & Simpson, 1999) might have inspired the need of the first two groups to return to the well-known territory of self-marketing and innocuous technical discussions.

In the case of the person, who gave the warning about the alpha type leaders, a system dynamic became obvious. She might have expressed the common basic assumption of her company, that reflection complicates decision taking. She

dispersed by explaining and holding on to her belief that this personality type is exclusively found on the top.

In the conversation with the person in need for containment, the dispersal happened as an emotional reaction. Being in an uncertain role during a merger and being afraid of a second burnout, her work identity was already fragile and the pressure of her emotions took over, while speaking about containment.

9.10 Negative Capability and Supportive Work Environment

Between the application of Negative Capability and a company culture that is conducive to learning, no clear correlation was found. Two participants applied all six Negative Capabilities activities in a very short-paced, dynamic environment with low support for experimenting and low tolerance for failure. The other participant, whose company had established dedicated innovation labs to improve creativity and innovation, left the Negative Capability cycle right after creating space.

It seems that the external supporting factors might be helpful, but they do not decide if a leader applies Negative Capability or not. The capacity to contain unpleasant emotions, the courage to face long held assumption and to allow them to be changed, are the most critical aspects for the application of Negative Capability. These aspects are mainly intrapersonal skills. Hence the best environmental learning conditions seem not to help, if the leader lacks these skills.

9.11 Negative Capability and Learning Anxiety

Unsurprisingly all 14 participants claimed that they want to improve and learn how to better deal with the unknown and uncertainty. Ten participants were unsure if Negative Capability would be the right way to engage with it. But they wanted to check if there are other “methods or tools” available. Only four participants demonstrated credible interest in Negative Capability and three saw its practical relevance right away.

This gap between intent and motivation to learn can be explained by Schein’s “learning and survival anxiety” (van de Loo & Lehmann, 2015).

All participants realized that they will face even more uncertainty in future and that they will have to adapt sooner or later. They are aware about their survival anxiety. But on the other hand, they face learning anxiety by “being afraid to try something new for fear that it will be too difficult, to look stupid in the attempt, or that we will have to part from old habits, that have worked for us in the past” (van de Loo & Lehmann, 2015).

Only four out of the 14 participants seem to be ready to engage with the ambiguity created by these dynamics.

10 Limitations

A potential limitation in this study is the small sampling size of the 14 leaders, who participated in the research. Additionally only leaders were approached for participation, from whom a certain degree of openness for the topic was assumed. With a higher number of participants the findings could have been verified on a broader scale.

Personality traits have not been taken into account for this thesis. This might have added an additional perspective about which type of a leader is more or less disposed to apply Negative Capability.

The system dynamics in the leaders' organisations were not considered as well, but are expected to have a critical impact on the application of Negative Capability.

Additionally the “Principle of Negative Capability”, which is derived from the limited amount of available literature on this topic, my own observations as a coach and my personal experiences, was introduced. In the principle, all six Negative Capability core activities are represented as self-contained chapters, but they are actually more overlapping and dynamic, especially in view of containment. For example when a leader starts to create space and engages with self-awareness, he already needs to contain his emotions to a certain level. Also when he travels from self-reflection over letting go to emergence, he may have to contain a new wave of arising emotions after discovering his blind spot, because a choice to either remain on the well-known path or to change and allow the emergence of an unknown outcome is required.

Containment is therefore a capability that radiates in all other stages and is not closed in itself.

During the transcription I became very aware about my own filters and recognised how selectively I had perceived some of the sharings during the interviews. That is why transcribing functioned as an extra mirror for me and helped verifying my own initial perceptions. Despite this realisation, other blind spots still might have impaired in the study without my awareness.

11 Future Research

Interesting areas for future Negative Capability research might be:

- The application of Negative Capability in leadership with a larger representative sampling size for the interviews.
- An investigation on how the system dynamics support or prevent the application of Negative Capability
- A more extensive research about how contemplative practice supports the application of Negative Capability
- The examination of the indication that younger leaders might be more capable to apply Negative Capability
- The examination about the potential correlation between
 - Personality traits and Negative Capability
 - Resilience and Negative Capability
 - Employee engagement and Negative Capability
 - Innovation and Negative Capability

12 Conclusion

The objective of this study was to investigate if leaders apply Negative Capability. It was researched to what extent leaders practise it in their daily business and what the main challenges were during their attempts to practice it.

A new “Principle of Negative Capability” was introduced. This is a process consisting of the following six core activities: creating space, self-awareness, containment, self-reflection, letting go and emergence (Annex 1).

Interviews were conducted with 14 leaders across several hierarchy levels and industries. The interviews were transcribed and analysed. The activities described by the leaders were then mapped to the six core activities.

The key findings are:

- All participants had never heard of Negative Capability and associated negatively with it.
- Nevertheless, 21% (3 out of 14) of the interviewed leaders were able to apply all six core activities intuitively.
- The remaining 79% of the participants, struggled with three out of the six core activities as their main challenges:
 - **Creating space** – 14% of the leaders (2 out of 14) were not even able to create the space to enter the process of Negative Capability, due to their prominent preference for activity.
 - **Containment** - 36% of the participants (4 out of 11), who got in touch with their thoughts and emotions could not stay with their own unpleasant feelings and those of others. They dispersed in explanation, emotional reaction or physical action in the external world.
 - **Letting go** - 50% of the leaders (3 out of 6) were unable to let go of their assumptions. These leaders immediately started to apply knowledge or solutions from the past or were (unconsciously) holding on to strong beliefs.
- Negative Capability is a capacity, which is exercised completely across all hierarchy levels.

- The application of Negative Capability depends highly on the personal capacity of the leader, because it is more an intrapersonal skill.
- Meditation and other contemplative practices seem to have positive effects on the personal capacity of the leader to apply Negative Capability.

From my point of view, Negative Capability will be the key leadership skill for future success. In our globally connected VUCA world, we are facing all sorts of disruptive changes every day. Leaders have to find new (collective) solutions based on fresh insights, otherwise the same results will be produced over and over again. More intelligent and holistic solutions are needed. But to get there, leaders first have to learn how to face the unknown by containing unpleasant emotions. Afterwards they have to let go of old habits and assumptions. Only then an unprejudiced openness or awareness allows the emergence of new solutions.

I would like to close with a quote from one of the interviewed leaders. “Leaders have to be reminded to be like parachutes, which only function when being open! Negative Capability, even if it first looks complex, is actually a very basic and practical tool for our everyday life.”

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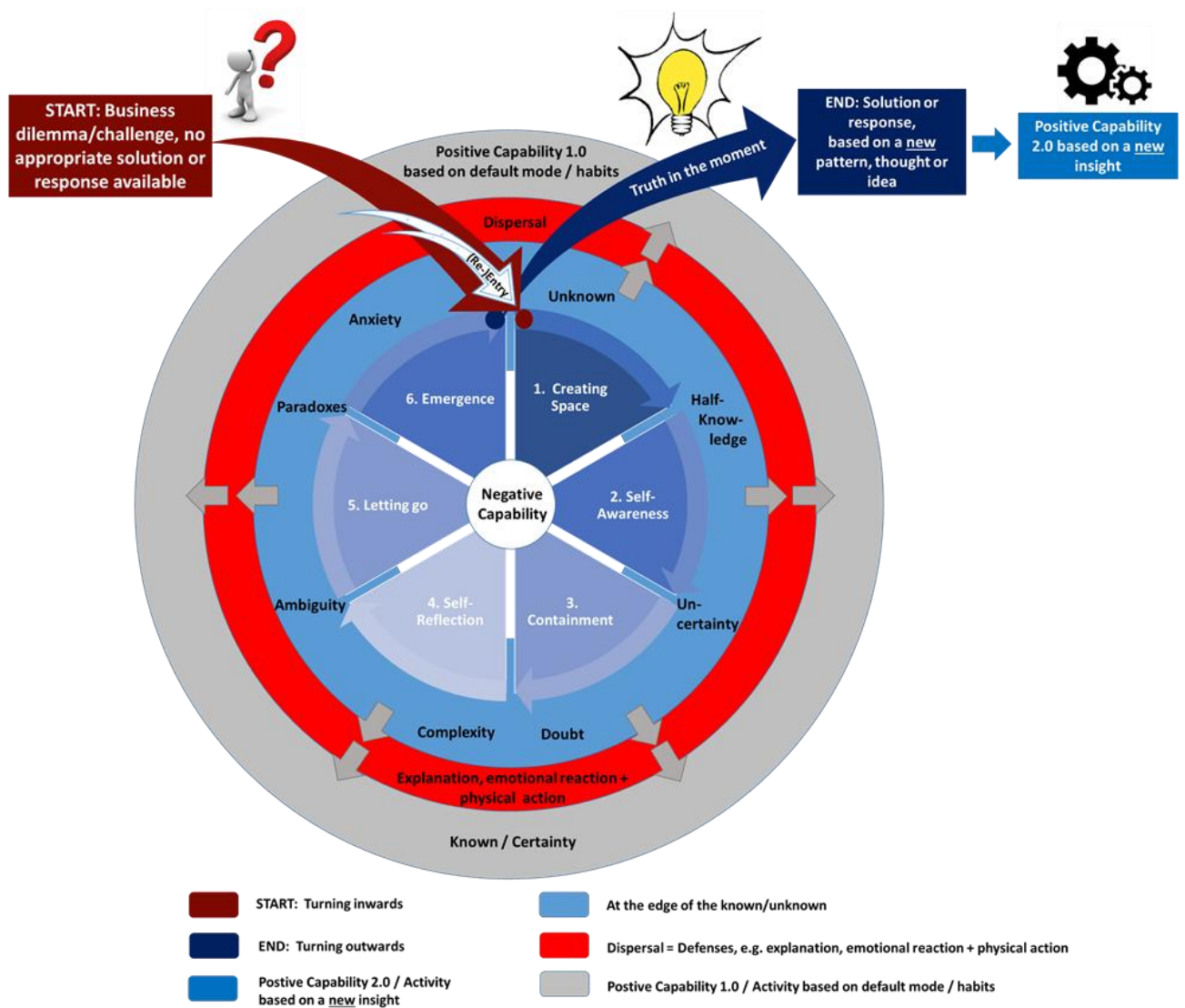
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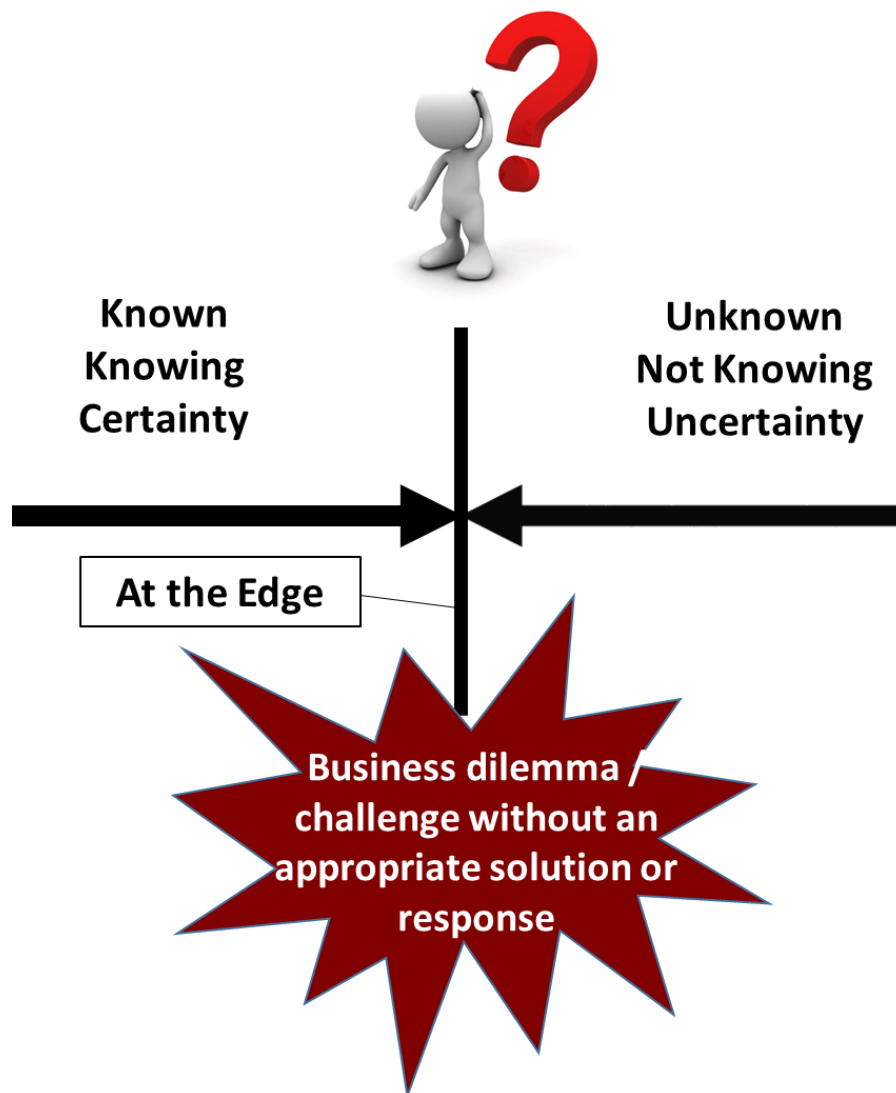
Annexes

Annex 1

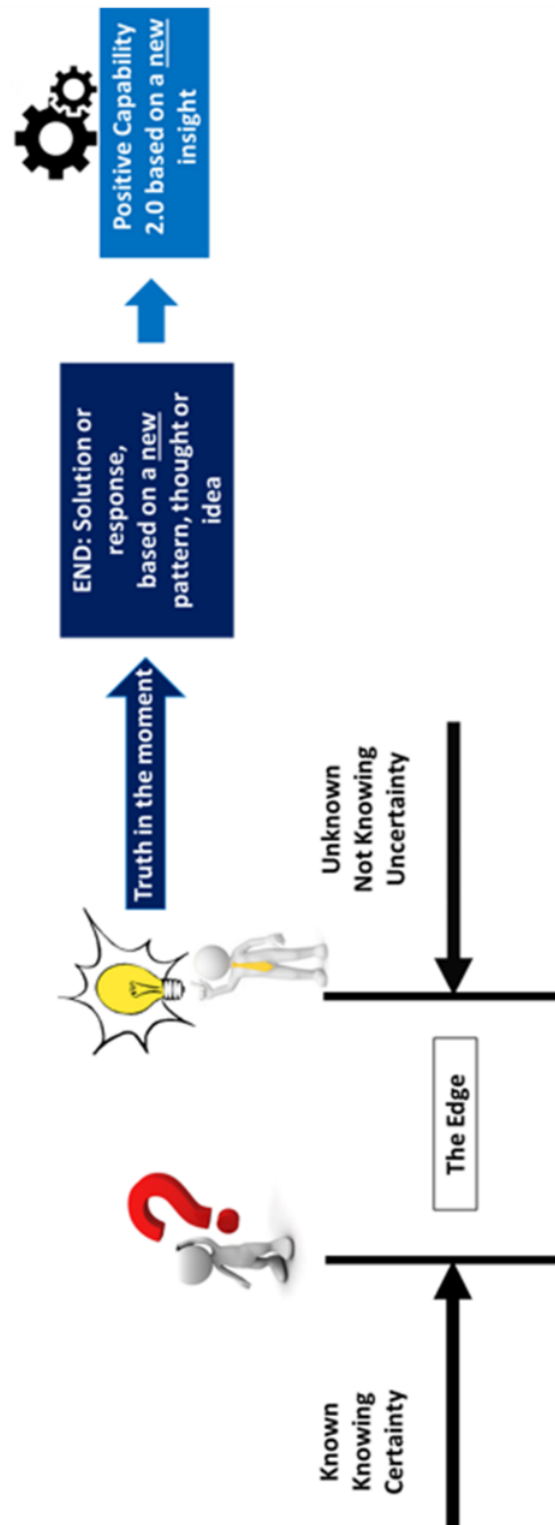
„Principle of Negative Capability“



Start Point of Negative Capability



End Point of Negative Capability



Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Age	Gender	Nationality	Working Country	Environment	Hierarchy level	Industry	Highest Educational Level	Do you meditate?
Participant 1	47	Male	German	currently Switzerland	General Management	1	Consulting	University Degree in Engineering and Business Economics	No
Participant 2	52	Female	German	Germany	Human Resources	2	Food & Bio Technology	PhD in Economics	No
Participant 3	48	Male	German	Germany	Technical Operations	3	Cable operator & Telecommunication	University Degree in Engineering	No, but Autogenous Training
Participant 4	43	Female	German	Germany	Business Management	4	IT & Telecommunication	MBA	No, but Reiki
Participant 5	53	Female	German	Germany	Technical Operations	4	Cable operator & Telecommunication	University Degree in Business Economics	Yes
Participant 6	43	Female	Croatian	Germany	Business Management	2	Banking	MBA	No
Participant 7	55	Male	German	Germany	General Management	1	Glass Production	University Degree in Business Economics	No
Participant 8	49	Male	German	Germany	Business Management	3	IT & Telecommunication	PhD in Electro Physics	Yes
Participant 9	46	Male	German	Germany	Software Development	3	IT & Telecommunication	University Degree in Macro Economics	No, but Qigong
Participant 10	51	Male	German	Germany	Risk Management	3	Insurance	University Degree in Engineering	No
Participant 11	42	Male	German	Germany	Human Resources	2	Energy (Power & Gas)	University Degree in Business Economics	No
Participant 12	46	Male	German	Germany	Information Technology & Technical Design	2	IT & Telecommunication	University Degree in Electrical Engineering	No
Participant 13	51	Male	German	Germany	Sales	2	Software Development	University Degree in Business Economics	No
Participant 14	41	Male	Austrian	Switzerland	Supervisory Board	0	Consulting	University Degree in Business Economics	No

Annex 5

Summary of Core Questions for Participant Interviews

Question 1:	Have you ever heard about Negative Capability or Reflective Inactivity?
Question 2:	What do you think it means?
Question 3:	What do you associate with the name Negative Capability and what with Reflective Inactivity?
Sharing	Sharing of <u>Keats definition of Negative Capability</u> : Negative Capability is a state, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 1899: 277).
Sharing	Sharing of <u>my definition of Reflective Inactivity</u> : Reflective Inactivity is the ability to stay in the realm of not knowing and half-knowledge without falling into an activity trap or reaching after fact & reason. By giving ourselves time and space we allow new thoughts and ideas to emerge and unfold (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016), (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002).
Sharing	Sharing of the "Principle of Negative Capability/Reflective Inactivity" (see Annex 1)
Sharing	Sharing why I find Negative Capability/Reflective Inactivity is an important leadership capacity.
Question 4:	What do you think?
Question 5:	Do you find it important? Why (not)?
Question 6:	Can you share an example from your professional life when you applied Negative Capability?
Question 7:	What works for you? What does not work for you? Why?
Reflection-Exercise	<u>Flower & bee reflection from Keats</u> : “It has been an old comparison for our urging on – the Bee hive – however it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee... Now it is more noble to sit like Jupiter tha(n) to fly like Mercury – let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive – budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favours us with a visit” (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016: 180).
Question 8:	What do you think?
Question 9:	What resonates with you? Why (not)?
Question 10:	How is ideation or innovation supported in your company?
Question 11:	How is learning supported in your company?
Question 12:	How is experimenting supported in your company?
Question 13:	How are mistakes handled in your company?
Question 14:	Can you describe an outstanding learning experience that also changed you?
Question 15:	Why did you pick this learning experience example?
Question 16:	Would you like to learn more about Negative Capability?