

CEOs' Perceptions of Loneliness in the Workplace: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: Loneliness among CEOs is a topic that draws the attention of leadership experts, as it was suggested that it's a less explored topic in leadership studies (Wright et al., 2023). The popular phrase "it's lonely at the top" suggests that top managers frequently experience loneliness in their roles. Not having someone close to confide in is a challenge for many leaders at work (George, 2015). CEO loneliness can have negative effects both individually (e.g., health, well-being and stress) and organizationally (e.g., commitment, employee perceptions of the CEO and turnover) (Wright et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021). The aim of this study was therefore to explore how CEOs perceived and experienced workplace loneliness; more specifically, we sought to identify what types of loneliness they encounter most often, what situations may trigger workplace loneliness, and how CEOs cope with loneliness in the workplace, in Norwegian organizational settings. Based on empirical results from 14 in-depth qualitative interviews with CEOs of small and medium-sized companies, it appeared they had experienced state loneliness at work and that none of them had reported trait loneliness. State loneliness often arose in situations such as confidentiality cases, decision-making processes and change management processes. Due to the nature of the CEO role, our participants stated that they often accepted the loneliness in the workplace as part of their role, which might suggest a potential coping strategy that they utilize. Other coping strategies that were found include disconnection techniques and the use of their support networks. Addressing this topic adds value to empirical research on leadership by raising awareness of the challenges of loneliness that business leaders in positions of power, specifically CEOs in a Norwegian cultural context, face in the workplace when performing their duties. It provides insight into the types of loneliness experienced, the situations that can trigger CEO loneliness, and how loneliness in the workplace can be addressed and mitigated.

Keywords: Loneliness in the Workplace; CEOs; State Loneliness; Coping Strategies; Exploratory Study.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, CEOs occupy the highest rank in the organizational chart, holding responsibilities, and facing complex challenges, constraints, and demands that can often go unnoticed (Porter and Nohria, 2018). A specific challenge is the lack of confidants, which potentially can engender loneliness, the concept this paper focuses on (George, 2015). Loneliness, often seen as a sign of weakness, is rarely acknowledged by leaders, presumably due to the associated stigma (Wright et al., 2023).

In 2012, a study showed that 50% of the participating CEOs had experienced workplace loneliness in their position. Among these, 61% said they believed it hindered their performance in their role (Saporito, 2012), suggesting that loneliness is an issue that needs to be addressed, both for companies wanting to retain their CEOs and for the CEOs themselves. More recently, in the first quarter of 2024, CEO turnover in the United States increased by 48% compared to 2023, and many leaders felt that the job was not worth the stress, pressure and loneliness it entails (Mohamed, 2024).

In a recent critical review of research conducted to date on executive loneliness, Lam, Giessner, Shemla and Werner (2024) identified 71 empirical studies and 5 conceptual articles dealing with executive loneliness in organizations. Surprisingly, of the empirical studies identified, only five focused exclusively on CEOs. The paucity of qualitative empirical studies focusing primarily on CEOs prompted the exploration of this theme in relation to the CEO population, with the aim of extending existing empirical findings with new observations and conclusions drawn from a Norwegian context.

Loneliness can affect CEOs, employees, organizations, and organizational outcomes. For example, it was suggested that loneliness can cause health problems (e.g. poor sleep, heart disease, weakened immunity) and can increase the risk of depression and anxiety (Wright et al., 2023). In the workplace, lonely CEOs may become emotionally detached and less committed, which can also negatively impact employee turnover and their perceptions of leader effectiveness (Chen et al., 2021; Gabriel et al., 2021).

The aim of this article is therefore to explore CEOs' loneliness at work by examining their individual experiences, identifying situational triggers, and understanding the coping strategies for this emotional state that are mobilized by this group.

Through a literature review and primary empirical data from CEOs of small and medium-sized companies in Norway, this study provides insight into the unique experience of loneliness at CEO level, adding value to existing empirical research on CEO loneliness and contributing with new perspectives from a non-Anglo-Saxon cultural and organizational context. It responds to calls for empirical research on CEO loneliness, aimed at shedding light on this understudied area within the discipline of management. By exploring specific work situations that trigger loneliness, and suggesting coping mechanisms, this work attempts to mitigate the negative effects of loneliness among CEOs, and in this way complements the existing literature with new findings on this population.

2. Literature Review

2.1 CEO Loneliness in the Workplace

Although most existing studies on executive loneliness have focused on leaders in general, rather than CEOs in particular (see Lam et al., 2024, pp. 5-13), for the purpose of this study, the terms "CEO" and "leader" were interchangeably used.

2.1.1 Conceptualization of Leader Loneliness

Despite the multitude of definitions of loneliness, there is no general consensus on a universal conceptualization (Lam et al., 2024). Indeed, the concept is complex, subjective in nature and depends on the context. One possible definition of leader loneliness refers to "an unpleasant feeling of perceiving disconnectedness due to a discrepancy between desired and achieved work relationships that are appraised as important in the leadership process" (Lam et al., 2024, p. 4). As this study aimed to explore the subjective experience of loneliness among CEOs, our findings will also contribute empirically to the conceptual development of executive loneliness from a Norwegian perspective, leading to a better understanding of this phenomenon, while considering the aforementioned definition.

2.1.2 Forms of Loneliness and Factors Related to Leader Loneliness

Loneliness can be categorized into "trait" loneliness, which is linked to personality traits and lasts over time (chronic), and "state" loneliness, which is temporary and situational in its nature (Silard & Wright, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). A recent review has identified several factors associated with leader loneliness at work: individual-level, relational, work and organizational, and contextual factors (Lam et al., 2024). Additional aspects to those included in the review by Lam et al. (2024) are presented below.

2.1.2.1 Individual-Level Factors

Leaders' personal characteristics and emotions play a significant role in their experience of loneliness. High emotional intelligence and confidence can mitigate feelings of loneliness, while low self-efficacy and poor emotional regulation can increase social isolation (Singh & Pathardikar, 2010; Wright, 2012; Zhang et al., 2019).

2.1.2.2 Relational Factors

The quality and authenticity of relationships within the workplace are crucial. Despite frequent social interactions, leaders may lack close and genuine connections with others (Gabriel et al., 2021; Silard & Wright, 2022), which can lead to feelings of loneliness (Zumaeta, 2019). The concept of emotional contagion, where emotions are transferred between individuals, further complicates these relationships, as leaders may feel the need to regulate their emotions and actions, which can feel inauthentic (Côté, 2005; Kaufmann & Kaufmann, 2015; Ong, 2022).

2.1.2.3 Work and Organizational Factors

Leaders face high levels of responsibility, visibility, and job demands, which can lead to stress or role conflicts between personal identity and role requirements (Raaheim, 2019; Zumaeta, 2019). The need to maintain a professional demeanor and manage confidentiality can result in a perceived social distance (Collinson, 2005;

Zumaeta, 2019), which, while sometimes beneficial for decision-making, can contribute to loneliness (Magee & Smith, 2013).

2.1.2.4 Contextual Factors

Environmental factors such as organizational culture and the external social environment also impact leader loneliness. Social support within the organization is often lacking, with leaders hesitant to seek help for fear of appearing incompetent (Zumaeta, 2019). Additionally, the broader societal context and expectations of leadership roles influence how loneliness is experienced and managed (Waytz et al., 2015).

2.2 Strategies for Coping with Loneliness

Several strategies for dealing with loneliness have been suggested by previous researchers. One of them includes disconnecting from work outside office hours and prioritizing the time to avoid constant work-related thoughts (Zumaeta, 2019). Moreover, maintaining a healthy lifestyle (e.g. proper eating, sleeping, exercise, and overall physical and mental health) can help alleviate loneliness and provides emotional relief. Fulfilment from leading and helping others can mitigate feelings of loneliness.

Support networks can help leaders cope effectively with loneliness (Zumaeta, 2019). Leadership roles often hinder the formation of friendships and emotional connections within organizations (Wright, 2012), especially for CEOs who lack peers at their level (Rokach, 2014). Despite spending significant time with employees (Gabriel et al., 2021), leaders often find workplace relationships unfulfilling (Bandiera et al., 2020) and experience non-reciprocal support dynamics, which can heighten loneliness (Rokach, 2014).

Internally, CEOs may find support from their board and their top management team. The chairman of board (COB) can be especially important for the CEO by offering advice and acting as a confidant (Krause, 2017). Externally, CEOs may seek support from friends, former colleagues, consultants, mentors, or peers in similar positions (Rokach, 2014; Zumaeta, 2019). External help like mentoring and executive coaching are effective in providing feedback, discussing challenges, and reducing feelings of isolation for top leaders (Wright, 2012). They can work as supervisors, which can contribute to better emotional health and reduced loneliness (Rokach, 2014).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Procedure

This study has followed a qualitative design (Bell et al., 2022) to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of leader loneliness. Primary data was collected to gain a first-hand perspective from the participants' views on leader loneliness.

The sample of participants included seven male and seven female CEOs from various regions of Norway. The subjects were selected by following a purposive sampling protocol (Saunders et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria for the study were: to hold a CEO position in a Norwegian small or medium-sized company and to have worked in this position for at least 12 months, regardless of the industry or age of the company to ensure greater diversity of perspectives and experiences.

3.2 In-depth Qualitative Interviews

A total of 14 in-depth interviews were conducted digitally, via Microsoft Teams, in Norwegian. Each interview lasted around an hour. The interview guide included questions about the CEO's role, organization's culture, emotions, interpersonal relationships, and loneliness. The interview guide was developed based on the literature review and adjusted following a pilot interview.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

Following the interviewing and transcription of the interviews, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021) was carried out as an analytical strategy. Given the qualitative design of this study, thematic analysis makes it possible to better understand participants' views and experiences of leader loneliness by generating themes, identifying patterns, and interpreting the meanings attributed to leader loneliness across the data set. We therefore followed the six-step guide recommended by Braun and Clarke, namely: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search for common themes, examination of themes, definition and naming of

themes and production of a final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021). Given the exploratory nature of this study, thematic analysis was considered an appropriate and valid strategy (Bell et al., 2022). NVivo 14 Release 1.7.1. software was used for running the steps 2 to 5 of the thematic analysis process.

4. Results

This study aimed to identify what situations could potentially trigger loneliness among CEOs in the workplace, and what were the common strategies to cope with it. The main findings and discussion are split into two parts focusing on situations triggering workplace loneliness (Table 1) and the coping strategies (Table 2). In this section, a set of quotes from the interviews are listed to represent the main findings.

4.1 Situations

Table 1: Work-related Situations that May Trigger CEO Loneliness in the Workplace

Type of Situation	% of CEOs Who Mentioned It
Confidentiality cases	50
Decision making	100
Sensitive employee cases	71
Change management processes	64

The first situation that could trigger workplace loneliness according to seven out of fourteen participants were confidentiality cases. *"Suddenly, there's a situation where you have no one to share things with, right? You have no one to talk to because the situation doesn't allow you to share it with anyone else, you have to make the decision yourself, right?"*

The second situation, decision making, was mentioned by all fourteen participants. *"But in the end, it's you who has to make decisions like 'Yes, we'll do it this way and that...' Then you feel a bit of loneliness, I think."*

The third situation triggering workplace loneliness was sensitive employee cases. *"Yes, I think those [sensitive employee cases] are the worst because they are the hardest to involve others in, right? If other things are going poorly, we can discuss how to build further growth or those kinds of things, but specifically with sensitive employee cases, those kinds of things, changing leaders, then you kind of have to tread carefully."*

The final situation mentioned was change processes. *"Like now with the merger that is happening, I feel like what is happening now is like a new dimension of loneliness. Because it's such technical things that I don't know anything about. I don't have the detail knowledge about it now, and it's so critical for our operation... So I feel like I am standing there all by myself."*

4.2 Coping Strategies

Table 2: CEOs' Strategies for Coping with Loneliness in the Workplace

Coping Strategy	% of CEOs Who Mentioned It
Having and using a trusted sparring partner	100
Mental and physical disconnection	43
Accepting loneliness as part of the role	71

The first coping strategy mentioned by all participants were utilizing sparring partners. *"So, it's a role where... I mean, the fact that you can't really discuss challenges with your employees and such, so if it weren't for (NAME), I don't think I would have stayed for so many years."*

Disconnecting from work was a coping strategy mentioned by 6 out of 14 participants. *"If I bring my [hobby] out one evening or one night, just something like that, in God's free nature with no one else around, it's like my way of, shall we say, taking back [control]."*

The final coping strategy or premise of workplace loneliness is accepting the loneliness as a part of the role. *"I think it's just a part of it [the role]... if you're going to be a top leader, that's how it is. Then you just have to live with that premise [of loneliness]. That's how it is."*

5. Discussion and Analysis

When examining workplace loneliness among CEOs, it is important to emphasize the difference between *state* and *trait* loneliness, as these terms represent two types of loneliness; the former is temporary and linked to specific situations, while the latter is linked to personality traits and is chronic in its nature (Silard and Wright, 2020). Our findings indicate that all fourteen participants experienced state loneliness in their work and none experienced trait loneliness. Furthermore, the experience of state loneliness was similar despite the fact that the executives came from different companies and had varying years of experience as CEOs. The examples of situations triggering workplace loneliness and the reasons why it is so common in a CEO position were surprisingly similar.

According to Wright (2012), individual and environmental factors may contribute more to workplace loneliness than hierarchical position alone. In consequence, CEOs with high emotional intelligence and self-efficacy may be less exposed to loneliness, despite being in a hierarchical position without peers (Singh and Pathardikar, 2010; Wright, 2012). This observation justifies the need for future studies that should take a closer look at CEO personality traits and the role they play in loneliness at work, as some individual variables could mitigate the risk of loneliness linked to personality traits.

From a temporality perspective (state (situational experience) versus trait (chronic experience), as described in Lam et al., 2024), this study focused primarily on the state loneliness. In the following paragraph, the situations that can trigger CEO loneliness are discussed.

5.1 Situations that May Trigger CEO Loneliness

Through the interviews, there were certain situational triggers that increased the experience of state loneliness among the CEOs. These included confidentiality cases, complex decision making and change management processes.

Confidentiality cases often triggered feelings of state loneliness among the participants, where the possibility to discuss their issues became limited and the feeling of a separation between themselves and their employees increased (Ong, 2022; Zumaeta, 2019). For example, one of the participants shared how they often know information that will directly affect their employees. By withholding information and treading more carefully around their employees, their personal preferences on how to act didn't align with the expectations in their role, which could lead to a role conflict and a lack of feeling authentic (Raaheim, 2019). It could also lead to a feeling of a larger social distance between the CEO and their employees (Waytz et al., 2015).

Situations involving *decision making* can often make the CEO feel quite lonely, as he or she is the only person with a global view of the problem and has great responsibility for having the final say, managing role conflicts and dealing with employee resistance. In this study, although many CEOs consulted with their management team or board of directors, they ultimately bore responsibility for final decisions, which was experienced as a form of situational loneliness (Wright, 2012). Disagreement within the management team can further amplify this loneliness, reducing psychological safety and increasing the feeling of being all alone at the top (Frazier et al., 2017). One of the participants also expressed how making decisions against their personal values was one of the main reasons they experienced loneliness in their position. Both confidentiality and decision making can lead to intra-role conflict where loneliness arises from the lack of authenticity in their role (Côté, 2005; Ong, 2022).

Due to *sensitive employee cases* at higher levels of the organization, CEOs felt alone as the decisions to be made would directly affect someone they knew personally, and the requirements for confidentiality were high. Such a situation could be felt particularly lonely given the great responsibility linked to the future of their employees and the feeling of isolation when making the decision (Wright, 2012). A higher degree of social distance between the CEO and their employees could facilitate the decision-making process (Collinson, 2005). In our study, CEOs who reported closer relationships at work experienced more loneliness when faced with confidentiality constraints and when making decisions that were likely to negatively affect their employees, compared to CEOs who maintained strictly professional working relationships.

Another situation likely to increase the perception of loneliness among the CEOs in our study concerns *change management processes*, where some CEOs explained that it led them to doubt themselves in their role. Participants reported decreased self-efficacy and increased loneliness during such processes, where they began to question their own skills and felt a lack of trust and support from others. The reciprocal relationship between

loneliness and self-efficacy can generate a downward spiral, highlighting the need for proactive support in these situations (Zhang et al., 2019).

5.2 Coping with Workplace Loneliness

The discussion above elaborated on state loneliness as the primary form of loneliness experienced by our participants. In this section, we expand on coping strategies that CEOs can use to deal with state loneliness in their role. This is necessary, given that workplace loneliness can negatively affect both physical and mental health (Silard and Wright, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). In our study, the CEOs mentioned the importance of having a reliable support network. This is consistent with other studies suggesting that using a support network is relevant both before and after situations including loneliness at work, and is essential for leaders (Zumaeta, 2019).

A *sparring partner* can support the CEO by offering them the opportunity to talk and by being there when the CEO needs someone to vent to. For instance, using a sparring partner can build confidence in decisions or provide suggestions for improvement, potentially increasing CEO self-efficacy (Zhang et al., 2019). In our study, the CEO's sparring partners included the deputy leader, other employees, board of directors, networks, external support, and spouse. A key sparring partner was also the chairperson of the board (COB), serving as a critical support resource to the CEO (Krause, 2017). Our participants felt less alone when they had a supportive COB with a listening ear, and emphasized the COB's understanding of the situation of the company. Thanks to a trusted sparring partner, the CEOs in our study were able to release their emotions and let off steam; this strategy helped them cope more effectively with loneliness at work.

In line with other empirical works (Zumaeta, 2019), our study identified *mental and physical disconnection* as another coping strategy that helped CEOs differentiate work from leisure and prioritize moments when they were not thinking about work. Our participants mentioned hobbies (working out, gardening, meditation), but also physical distancing activities like shopping in another part of the city to avoid meeting employees after work. The social distance resulting from such activities allowed the CEOs to disconnect from work pressures and enabled emotional detachment from employees (Collinson, 2005); furthermore, it allowed CEOs to maintain professional working relationships with their employees (Rokach, 2014). These observations may give rise to a paradox. On the one hand, CEOs indicated disconnection and social distance as a coping strategy for dealing with loneliness in their role. On the other hand, according to social psychology, humans are complex social beings who need to belong and integrate into social groups (Raaheim, 2019; Zumaeta, 2019). Our participants, however, did not explicitly express the need to belong. This suggests that the need to belong may not be as strong among leaders and executives (Waytz et al., 2015; Wright, 2012). Given the importance of context and the fact that state loneliness is linked to specific situations characteristic of their role, it is plausible to assume that, in order to cope effectively with loneliness, a CEO may wish to strike the right balance between disconnection and social distance, on the one hand, and the need to belong, to form and maintain social relationships, on the other.

Finally, *accepting loneliness as part of their role* is another coping strategy for CEOs. Given the nature of the role, and because they themselves accepted it voluntarily, several of our participants explained that a leader must accept a certain degree of loneliness in his or her role. Acceptance of loneliness is relevant to approach in terms of the coping strategies, emotions and well-being of leaders; one might ask whether either of the two coping strategies discussed here would be different if acceptance were not part of the CEOs' experience.

Feeling lonely can lead to negative emotions, which can influence work efforts and outcomes (Rokach, 2014; Silard & Wright, 2020). These negative emotions may harm the well-being of leaders, affecting their social and psychological functioning (Bachman et al., 2023). However, since CEOs in our study viewed loneliness at work as a part of their role and consciously accepted it, it can be argued that feelings of loneliness did not significantly affect their emotions and well-being. This observation deserves greater attention in the literature, as the negative effects of loneliness appear to be less severe among CEOs compared to other populations.

Regardless of the importance of the acceptance premise and its influences on the CEOs' coping strategies and experience, acceptance creates a need for emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is the effort to control one's emotions (Côté, 2005). Several participants explained that they were trying to be role models and lead by example, which suggests the notion of emotional contagion (Kaufmann and Kaufmann, 2015). To keep this contagion positive, our participants regulated their negative emotions. Reasons for regulating negative emotions included increasing work effort and creating a positive environment. The rationale for CEOs regulating their

emotions rather than preventing their own loneliness may be due to the acceptance of loneliness in the workplace as part of the CEO's role.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore CEOs' perceptions of loneliness in the workplace. Our results indicate that CEOs often experienced state loneliness due to the unique demands of their role, leading to short-term feelings of isolation and a certain degree of disconnection. Key situations triggering CEO loneliness in the workplace include confidentiality cases, sensitive employee issues, decision-making and change management processes. These instances often lead to feelings of social distance, lack of authenticity, and reduced self-efficacy. By identifying these triggers, our study contributes to raising awareness and helping CEOs and their support networks to mitigate these feelings. To cope with loneliness, finding a way to disconnect from work or utilizing a support network could be helpful. In addition, it seems that CEOs have a tendency to accept that state loneliness is a natural part of their role. This acceptance may help to explain why the CEOs in our study only experienced state loneliness in their position, without letting it affect them much outside of work.

7. Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size, comprising just 14 CEOs of small and medium-sized Norwegian companies. This precludes generalizability to other similar contexts. Future research should focus on larger samples to examine possible convergences or differences with the results of this study.

Moreover, further efforts should extend the scope of executive loneliness research to larger organizations, to determine whether organizational size and sector play a role in how loneliness is perceived by CEOs.

Future research should also consider the influence of national culture on how loneliness is perceived and addressed in organizational settings. As most empirical studies have been carried out in Anglo-Saxon national contexts, this study has the merit of having contributed to empirical research in a Norwegian cultural context, thus broadening the cultural horizon of this field of research.

This study also challenges the notion that desired social relationships always reduce loneliness. Our results suggest that close relationships at work can sometimes increase CEO loneliness due to the need for confidentiality. This paradox and the influence of personality traits on loneliness may warrant further research.

Finally, more robust models for studying loneliness and its impact on people at work can help researchers and practitioners to develop targeted measures and policies for leadership practice in organizations (Lam et al., 2024).

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