Supply Chain Leaders as Change Agents: An Empirical Investigation of SCOMEs' Influence on Organizational Sensemaking

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Summary
In this paper, we investigate the role and impact of supply chain leaders on their organization. We leverage structure-as-strategy and upper echelon theory to investigate how and under what conditions supply chain leaders drive systemic change within their organizational confines and across boundaries. In particular, we study a set of 18 Supply Chain and Operations Management Executives that operate at the level of the top management team or board of executives. Our findings highlight both what SCOMEs do within their organizational contexts, as well as how their individual backgrounds shape their sensemaking and shift their attention.

Introduction

In an era of globalized supply chains and continuous disruptions, supply chain and operations management has once again become essential to organizational success. Historically however, managing operations and supply chain was a task for middle management and day-to-day operations did not receive much executive attention. More and more however, organizations appoint Chief Supply Chain Officers and equivalent functions in their top management teams to drive transformation and create top-level commitment to the operations of the firm. As one informant of our study espoused: "*It is all about customer sales and product, but the right CEOs are giving a tremendous amount of focus now on supply chain because supply chain is becoming a major source of competitive advantage.*" These Supply Chain and Operations Management Executives (SCOMEs) lead and direct specific supply chain functions, such as logistics or procurement, but also influence the overall firm strategy by representing the SCOM function in the top management team. SCOMEs are reported as being 'positive difference makers' (Kroes *et al.*, 2022).

Many large companies appoint a SCOME to centrally oversee the supply chain and operations management function, including global supply chain design, planning, manufacturing, logistics, and retail. For example, Apple's Chief Operating Officer, Jeff Williams is responsible for the global operations, while Apple's Senior Vice President for Operations, Sabih Khan, is responsible for overseeing planning, procurement, and manufacturing ("Apple Leadership", n.d.). In general, organizations with complex supply chains or high levels of operational complexity are likely to have a dedicated supply chain leader to ensure that the organization's supply chain execution aligns with its business strategy.

Current literature has found that such appointments have substantially positive effects on firm financial performance (Hendricks *et al.*, 2015; Kroes *et al.*, 2022) and the ability to deal with complex supply chains in cases of quality issues and crises (Körber and Cotta, 2021; Wagner and Kemmerling, 2014). Most literature, in other words, has studied the managerial implications of appointments and the presence of SCOMEs in top management teams, and not *supply chain leadership*.

Supply chain leadership can be defined "as a process of influencing individuals or groups in order to achieve stated objectives" (Defee, Esper, *et al.*, 2009, p. 92). These individuals or groups, in the case of supply chains, can be present both within the own organization as well as in the wider supply chain (Defee, Stank, *et al.*, 2009). The source of a supply chain leaders influence can best be described in accordance with situational leadership theory. This theory states that power "is the means by which the leader gainst the follower's compliance" (Hersey *et al.*, 1979, p. 419), and in addition that different powers can therefore be linked to different leadership behaviors (cf. Defee, Esper, *et al.*, 2009; Jia *et al.*, 2019).

The limited literature on supply chain leadership has looked mainly at (transactional, transformational) leadership styles and their impact on operational performance such as disruptions, resilience, recalls, or sustainable performance (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Gosling *et al.*, 2016; Jia *et al.*, 2019; Mokhtar *et al.*, 2019; Shin and Park, 2021). However, limited attention has been paid to how such supply chain leaders effectuate such outcomes. In other words: what do they do? Rather than focusing on the quantifiable effects of the appointment of SCOMEs on various operational and financial metrics, we are therefore explore how their leadership position enables them to effectuate change within their organization and supply chain(s). Our research question is:

RQ: How do Supply Chain and Operations Management Executives lead their organization, SCOM function, and supply chains?

Our study is based on interviews with 18 SCOMEs from different (manufacturing) industries, including executives with overarching responsibilities (e.g., Chief Supply Chain Officers) as well as more function-specific responsibilities (e.g., Chief Procurement Officer). We conducted interviews and further document analysis to construct a grounded theory of SCOMEs sense making and influence on organizational outcomes (Olcott and Oliver, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Our study is among the first to delineate the roles and responsibilities of supply chain leadership at the level of top management teams.

Literature background

SCOMEs are top management team (TMT) level executives who centrally oversee functions associated with supply chains, such as procurement, logistics, and provide a holistic overview of the firm's supply chain and operational tasks (Hendricks *et al.*, 2015; Körber and Cotta, 2021; Kroes *et al.*, 2022). The title of Chief Supply Chain Officer is common in practice, but executives with supply chain responsibilities sometimes carry different titles, such as vice-president, or executive vice-president, or function-specific designations such as chief procurement officer (Hendricks *et al.*, 2015). Executives such as SCOMEs are appointed by the Board of Directors / Supervisory Board and hold positions in the top management team (TMT) of the organization. They typically report to another C-suite executive, such as the CEO, COO, or CFO.

Especially since the financial crises in 2008 and the Japan-Earthquake-Tsunami in 2011, firms have focused once again on their day-to-day operational routines and value creation functions, culminating in the appointment of more and more SCOMEs in TMTs (Kroes et al., 2021, Körber and Cotta, 2021). This has been even further promoted by the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, where boards found themselves grappling with the limits of their operational and supply chain functions. In the past, we have seen similar increases in the prevalence of Chief Marketing Officers (Nath and Bharadwaj, 2020), Chief Risk Officers (Pernell *et al.*, 2017), or Chief Sustainability Officers (Henry *et al.*, 2019). Recently, there have been calls-to-action to appoint even Chief Trade Officers, who would specifically monitor and control geopolitical regulatory developments ("Why Your Company Needs a 'Chief Trade Officer'", 2022). In all these cases, the C-suite has grown as a result of isomorphic and mimetic institutional forces (Roh *et al.*, 2016), in which organizations are under similar pressures to monitor and control their supply chains, and copy each other's structural changes to the TMT-level representation of a functional area in the firm.

An early exploration of the manufacturing firms (SICs: 2200-2790, 3010-3990) reveals a significant *decrease* in the number of SCOMEs after, compared to before, the global pandemic, see Figure 1. This paradox is intriguing, as 'the supply chain' has never received more attention in public media, investor meetings, and popular perception than at the outbreak and during the aftermath of the pandemic (cf. Figure 1 in Körber and Cotta, 2021 which shows a large *increase* in SCOME presence from 2000-2017).
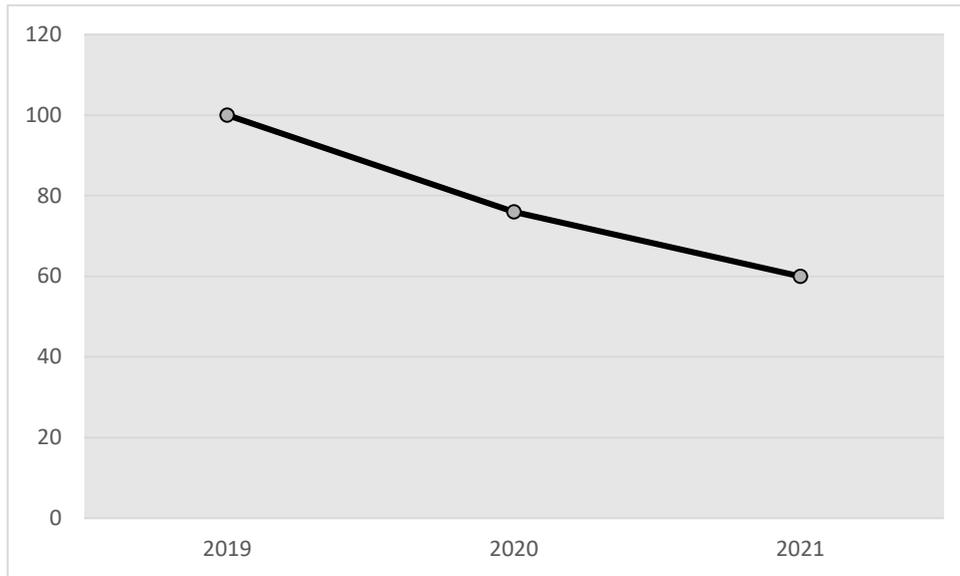
Figure 1: The number of firms (out of 373 sampled) that have at least one SCOME in the given year. Note: the number decreases from 100 in 2019 to just 60 in 2021. Source: data compiled by the authors from Compustat, BoardEx.

In either case, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to how these executives understand their role and how they orchestrate their daily activities. This means that we need to investigate the responsibilities and the daily activities of SCOMEs in order to understand how leaders shape this role and how these executives understand their own position in the firm and supply chain. In order to understand the role of supply chain leaders, we build on the notions of contingency theory for leadership (Fiedler, 1967; Miller *et al.*, 2022; Roh *et al.*, 2016) and upper echelon theory for executives' behaviour (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Kroes *et al.*, 2022), and leverage specific insights stemming from supply chain leadership examinations in the nascent literature.

Contingency perspectives
First, firms have developed new structures to monitor and control their supply chain functions from the upper echelons, driven in part by disruptions and crises that have created renewed awareness of the importance of supply chain and operations performance, for overall firm performance. In order to deal with high levels of environmental dynamism in the supply chain, firms devise structures that elevate the function to the top management team (Dubey *et al.*, 2018; Kroes *et al.*, 2022). The growing importance of SCOM functions to business operations and strategy would mean that the function has to be represented within the top management team. Moving the supply chain into the C-suite creates additional functional focus, and cognitive diversity in the corporate upper echelon (Miller *et al.*, 2022; Narayan *et al.*, 2021).

We also know that supply chains of organizations differ in terms of their complexity and that a SCOMEs handling of the operational and supply chain aspects of the firm may therefore depend on the nature of the organization's supply chain. The contingency perspective suggests that as an organization's supply chain function matures, leaders need to adapt their leadership styles to the changing circumstances (Roh *et al.*, 2016), calling for situational leadership (Hersey *et al.*, 1979; Kull *et al.*, 2019). For example, in the early stages of supply chain development, a directive leadership style may be more effective, to establish clear processes and procedures. As the supply chain function becomes more mature, a more participative leadership style may be appropriate, leveraging valuable

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input from experienced employees. Similarly, supply chains with higher levels of complexity, risks or needs for resilience, or those particularly vulnerable to geopolitical factors may also require different leadership styles and behaviour (Fan *et al.*, 2022; Kull *et al.*, 2019; Roscoe *et al.*, 2020).

Upper Echelons Theory

Secondly, we note that the strategic decisions of top executives are influenced by their bounded rationality and functional and demographic backgrounds. Hambrick and Mason's (1984) Upper Echelon Theory posits that top leaders make strategic decisions based on their individual cognitive characteristics and past experiences. According to the theory, senior leaders filter their surroundings and selectively perceive information that is most relevant to their cognitive profiles. This means that the same information may be interpreted differently by different leaders, leading to different strategic decisions. The Upper Echelon Theory emphasizes that the personal characteristics of senior leaders are key determinants of organizational outcomes. The theory suggests that the selection and promotion of top leaders should be based on their cognitive and experiential diversity to improve the quality of strategic decision-making (Hambrick, 2007). The Upper Echelon Theory has important implications for supply chain leadership because it suggests that the personal characteristics of top leaders can significantly impact supply chain performance. For example, the earlier mentioned Jeff Williams, Apple's chief operating officer, holds a degree in mechanical engineering, while other supply chain leaders such as Proctor and Gamble's Michael A. Cusumano are more intensely schooled in business administration through MBAs and executive trainings. Leaders who are cognitively diverse and have varied experiences (cf. Narayan *et al.*, 2021) may be better equipped to navigate the complex and dynamic nature of supply chain management (Hendricks *et al.*, 2015; Körber and Cotta, 2021; Kroes *et al.*, 2022; Wagner and Kemmerling, 2014). Miller et al. discuss the role of cognitive diversity and conclude that many believe that leaders "are most effective when bringing different perspectives and ideas to their collective decision-making" (2022, p. 806) while cautioning for the possible negative interaction as people tend to like those who think like them.

Ergo, we are interested to investigate whether background characteristics such as education, or organizational characteristics such as demand variability and firm size, influence the contributions that SCOMEs make to the top management team.

Methods
Methodological approach
We conducted qualitative research to investigate what SCOMEs do, leveraging retrospective insights offered to us through interviews. We construct grounded theory by following systematic but flexible guidelines for the analysis of qualitative data (Charmaz, 2014) particularly using initial and focused coding. Our level of analysis is the individual executive officer and the role that they currently have in the organization. At the same time, these individuals are expert in their respective domains and by nature reflect both on their current and past occupations.

Data collection
We have conducted an empirical analysis based on interviews with 18 highest-ranking SCOMEs – see Table 1. These interviewees were selected using replication logic – meaning we did not have a-priori expectations about conceptual differences between SOCMEs leadership. We purposefully selected interviewees (Patton, 1990) to represent

a high degree of diversity in a) individual backgrounds (e.g., functional experience, education) and b) organizational context (industry, reporting structure).

The interviews for the most part have been conducted in 2021. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim – which forms the main source of data for our analysis.

Each interview, after introductions, started with the question 'Please describe your main tasks and responsibilities as a respective SCOME in your company.' Our analysis in this paper is mostly based on the answer to this single question—which typically took ~10 minutes to answer. In this first question, our interviewees usually already offered a summary of what was expounded upon later, while each interview than zoomed in on specific aspects of the respective SCOMEs tasks and responsibilities. This first question provides the most neutral exposition of the SCOMEs own sense making of their role and forms the basis for our analysis in this paper.

Data Analysis

From the interview transcripts, we conducted two rounds of coding, initial and focused (Charmaz, 2014). During initial coding, we focused on fragments of data (e.g., words, sentences) which we occasionally transfer into codes. We continued processing our data iteratively when and as we were conducting interviews, in order to focus later interviews already on emerging categories.

During focused coding, we study and compare these initial codes to examine the larger batch of data, consisting of all interviews. Initial codes that were most important and significant in exploring SCOMEs understanding of their role received more focus. We finally arrived at a detailed coding structure which we retroactively applied to all interview transcripts.

Table 1 – Interviewees

#	Position	Industry
1	Global Supply Chain Management Director	Protective Materials
2	Senior Director Supply Chain Management	Semiconductors
3	Chief Supply Chain Officer	Medical Equipment
4	Global VP Supply Chain Operation & Strategy	Nutrition
5	Executive Demand and Supply Chain Leader	Nutrition
6	Supply Chain Executive	Food Processing
7	VP Supply Chain	Semiconductors
8	VP Customer Care & Supply Chain	Medical Equipment
9	Chief Supply Chain Officer	Medical Equipment
10	Chief Procurement Officer	Plant Machinery
11	Chief Supply Chain Officer	Marine Electronics
12	Executive VP Manufacturing	Transportation Equipment
13	Chief Supply Chain Officer	Textile
14	Chief Operations Officer	Paper and Film Coating
15	VP Supply Chain Consulting	Chemicals
16	VP Group Supply Chain	Food
17	Chief Operations Officer	Renewable Energy
18	Executive VP Global Logistics	Construction Equipment

Results

We visualize our preliminary study findings in Figure 2. These findings are preliminary as we are still conducting further analysis. The analysis of the respondents sensemaking of their role reveals that SCOMEs have influence at three main levels (Kroes *et al.*, 2022). First, as the highest-ranking executives responsible for supply chain and operations, SCOMEs steer and direct business functions or divisions, specifically to create agility, manage stakeholder relationships, and 'the war on talent' . Secondly, SCOMEs also influence other organizations, such as tier-1 suppliers, through external integration and prioritization. Finally, SCOMEs influence top management team priorities and goal setting.
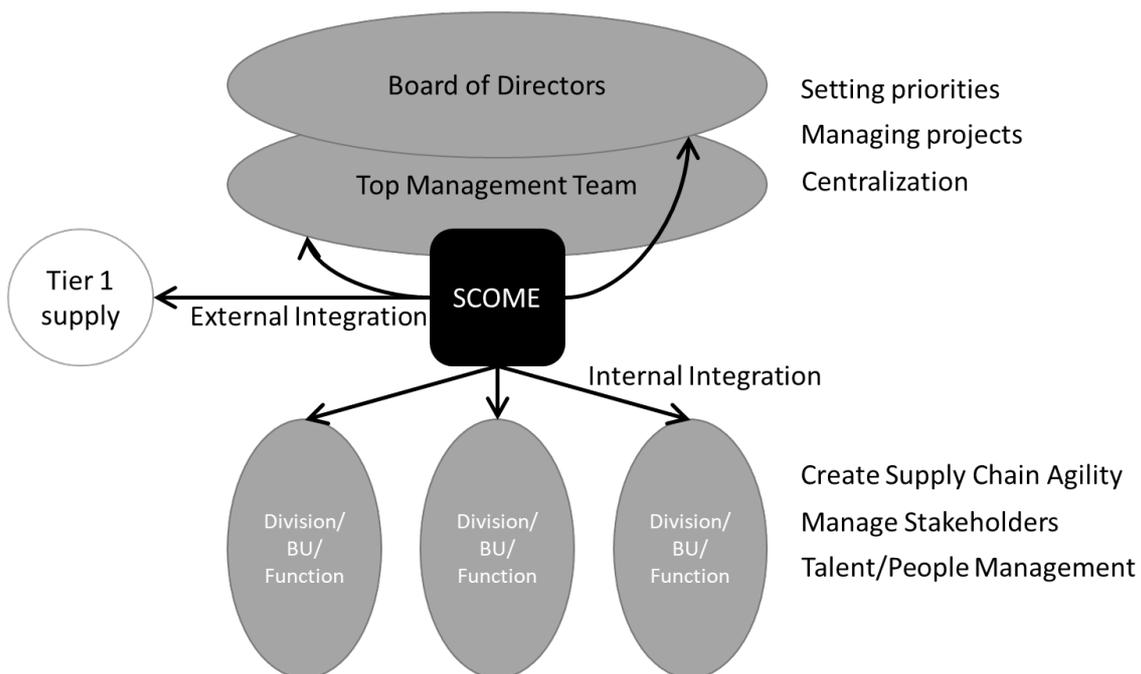

Figure 2 - Model of SCOMEs' influence

Thematic analysis

Based on our findings, we observe that **internal** and **external integration** through information exchange and centralization are an important task: "*I have relationships with all our major partners. [...] With the needs that we had I was getting involved in weekly calls along with our partners' CSCOs and CEOs to ensure that we were getting the priority on the allocation, making sure we were negotiated in the right way to get that allocation.*" This requires internal integration: "*It is my job to connect the departments with each other",* as well as external integration: "*We, and our suppliers could not be able to survive, without close co-operation that we have on a daily basis. But also intimate knowledge about their supply chains, and trying to help them, you know, managing the entire multi-tier supply chain. So I invest heavily in deep, deep, deep relationships with the suppliers*". Internal and external integration requires leadership that is focused on 'building bridges', 'a positive personal account', and 'supply chain intimacy'. Using situational leadership theory, this requires leaders to enact their connection power, expert power, and to some extent information power (Hersey *et al.*, 1979).

Internal integration includes aligning different functions and promoting internal exchange: "[The SCOME is] *the coach who needs very good arguments to convince managing directors to work towards a common group optimum and not for the individual benefit.*" We also tentatively observe that SCOMEs in organizations with higher levels of demand variability attribute higher importance to the alignment between different

functions in the organization, particularly to improve supply chain agility. In particular, this requires leaders to leverage their connection power to induce compliance with organizational (or supply-chain wide) perspectives (Hersey *et al.*, 1979).

External integration was mostly focused on collaborations with (upstream) suppliers, but also extends to the organization's own role as a supplier: "*It is a challenge in itself to maintain a consistent, reliable supplier to our customers.*" Influence over external relations can stem from the power of building connections, as before, but in additional also from expert power when the supply chain leader's own expertise can facilitate the objectives of followers (Defee, Stank, *et al.*, 2009). We also observe that SCOMEs with higher levels of technology intensity in their industries, attribute higher importance to the creation of external relationships.

In addition, managing the organizations '**war on talent**' is a recurring theme: "*I really have a career plan where people have to make different career steps [...]. And by exposing those to different functions they know their content, they know details, they know the operations.*" In today's job market, finding talent is increasingly difficult, and retaining them possibly even more so: "*Real good supply chain people are not so many. So very important is that I am developing my teams, and that is what I put always as very important goal for myself to ensure that I do that*". Similarly, people management ensures that "*the right people [are] in the right place*". SCOMEs influence the recruitment and further development of supply chain talent for example by starting 'global supply chain acquisition programs' or 'academies' and engage in career events and internships. A supply chain leader's reward power (Hersey *et al.*, 1979) suggests that transformational leadership is required to emphasize supply-chain wide goals and to provide followers (talent) with rewards and recognition that allows them to thrive (Defee, Stank, *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, at the executive and business transformation level, SCOMEs create value through **managing projects** at the interface of business divisions and IT, and continuous improvement. On the one hand, this means dealing with disruptions: "*In 2016, when I was there actually, we got a hurricane over the facility. So the whole area was flooded and then your production might stop all of a sudden. So then it is really about is everybody safe? Ok. And if that is taken care of then it is about ok do we have raw materials on the facility, can we still run? Do we still have people?*" This is made possible by enhanced visibility across the entire supply chain and stakeholder management across different domains of influence: "*Having that view of every part of the supply chain, having one person responsible for every part of the supply chain meant we could act much more quickly.*" Executives in supply chain positions contribute to their organizations by orientating the functions to deliver value, manage stakeholders, and supply chain agility: "*Timely putting it high on the agenda, setting crisis teams, finding the right mix between things we had in place, contingency and capabilities to respond to crises. [...] Taking decisions to go from a monthly to a weekly S&OP, explaining what we needed from the different stakeholders. [...] And take the lead and communicate clearly.*" Part of the leader's behaviour is therefore related to setting priorities for their followers, as well as the development of shared mental models, or sensemaking, which lead to more effective coordination of resources (Defee, Esper, *et al.*, 2009), especially when under threat of supply chain breakdowns caused by disruptions (Olcott and Oliver, 2014). This requires SCOMEs to manage projects in different domains: "*What I have as myself is I have a couple of improvement projects that I am owner of and then I have in my team, maybe globally, thirty/forty projects that my team is executing, and that whole portfolio needs to deliver a certain value. That is what I am responsible for.*" Managing projects and information flowing through the organization allows supply chain

leaders to exercise information and legitimate power (Hersey *et al.*, 1979), which gives them a level of control over sensemaking about the state of the organization's supply chain.

Individual differences based on upper echelon theory

At the same time, we also find important differences among the individuals understandings of their own role. Most importantly, executives with an MBA education contribute more to the organization's wellbeing through managing operational teams. SCOMEs who report this have completed executive Masters of Business Administration or dedicated leadership programs at renowned business schools such as Stanford University, HEC Paris, or Mannheim Business School. No informants without executive educations emphasised guiding an operational expert team to be a primary factor. Following the referred tendency, executive education programs (providing expert power) raise SCOMEs' awareness of integrative leadership practices.

When SCOMEs hold an executive position in the board (legitimate power), they have higher influence over the priorities of the top-management-team and are able to shape the organization's agenda for managing supply chain affairs: "*More and more after the pandemic people understand that I'm the professional.[...] I can set priorities and I can steer direction.*" According to one respondent: executive boards are "often too far away" and perceive various, usually contradictory or biased information streams. SCOMEs can provide neutral views, not tainted by specific (regional) interests of particular business units. Consistent with the referred tendency, all informants without an executive position, did not emphasise the importance of executive impact factors.

A further consideration in relation to the SCOME's position is the scope of their responsibilities. Almost half of the respondents describe that procurement is still treated as a separate entity within the organization, despite integrating most other SCOM functions into one overarching executive position. Procurement in these organizations is still a separate entity with own distinct reporting lines. One respondent, themselves a Chief Supply Chain Officer, even reports to a Chief Procurement Officer, which somehow means a more encompassing and overarching role reports to a more specialized function. As another respondent puts it: "*That is in my opinion, in my mind, the stupidest thing to do. To have a supply chain reporting into a CPO role, because my boss always tells me, supply chain runs the business.*"

Organizational differences based on contingency perspectives

Interestingly, we do not find differences between reported responsibilities (espoused above) and the reporting structures of SCOMEs, nor on whether procurement is included in the SCOMEs responsibilities or still treated separately. In general, we find a high variety of role descriptions that are difficult to explain. Organizations have clearly different expectations of their SCOMEs, which is also reflected in how performance of SCOMEs themselves is assessed and rewarded. Future research and further analyses will have to dive deeper into the matching between supply chain leaders' responsibilities and their key performance indicators.

Furthermore, organizational characteristics influence prioritization of specific responsibilities. We find that SCOMEs of firms with higher levels of technology intensity attach greater importance to external collaboration compared to firms with limited technology intensity. We also find that demand variability drives attention to manage internal alignment between business functions, in order to manage the decoupling point between forecast-driven upstream supply chains and order-driven downstream supply chains. None but one organization with predictable demand patterns focused on aligning internal functions in their day-to-day activities.

Discussion

Our research hence offer an emerging theorization of the role of Supply Chain Leaders and specifically Supply Chain and Operations Management Executives. Our research is amongst the first to offer a qualitative, grounded theory of the executives' role understanding, positions, and specific tasks and responsibilities.

Our research explicates and delineates the responsibilities that supply chain leaders carry, specifically in the areas of internal and external integration, managing people, and within the top management team (Kroes *et al.*, 2022). Our data provide one of the first sets of empirical evidence on sense making by SCOMEs themselves. Whereas previous research has largely leveraged secondary data to establish the influence of SCOMEs on financial performance, stock markets, or product recalls (Hendricks *et al.*, 2015; Körber and Cotta, 2021; Kroes *et al.*, 2022), our research describes the phenomenon of supply chains leadership based on qualitative insights from respondents' own lived reality. This provides important insights into the various responsibilities that supply chain leaders hold.

Specifically, our research points in the direction of a number of important facets of a supply chain leader's behaviour. First, supply chain leaders can, and arguably should, leverage different sources of power within their organization and across the supply chain. Those facets of power at the very least include connection power (building bridges), expert power (knowledge brokering), and legitimate power (coercing compliance) (Hersey *et al.*, 1979). This paper is amongst the first to leverage situational leadership perspectives based on behaviour and power in the context of supply chain management. Second, a supply chain leaders role within the organization various based on individual, and organizational contingencies. We find that leaders with MBA-level educational backgrounds (Hambrick, 2007; Wagner and Kemmerling, 2014), in comparison to those with other, oftentimes more technical/engineering educations, engage in more structured management of operational teams. It appears that executive education prepares them for management through projects and teams, rather than more functionally oriented line management. Third and finally, we find that supply chain leadership can drive attention of the top management team to (or away from) supply chains (cf. Narayan *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly the case when supply chain leaders obtain a legitimized position on the executive board themselves and when they have overarching, holistic, responsibilities over then entire chain, rather than a more siloed, functional focus.

Our further analyses provide new lines of scientific inquiry that need to be explored both on our data set as well as on future empirical evidence. First, our research suggests that the relative importance of some responsibilities depends on the individual background and organizational context of SCOMEs. Educational background and industry/firm characteristics are shown to influence leaders' sense making of their role. Secondly, our research demonstrates that the influence and impact of supply chain leaders of the executive level requires further scientific inquiry. Whereas our analyses reveal the importance of mandate, agenda and priority setting, and change management, further research has to incorporate sensemaking perspectives from other top management team members. With the supply chain function rising once again to the level of C-suite decision making and with cost not the sole driver of operational performance in this area anymore, the respective roles of other TMT members are also directed more towards operational aspects than before. Further scholarly examination is required to investigate how different responsibilities are shared among TMT members with functional expertise and experience in this domain.

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Appendix: Interview Guideline

Introduction	Assess background characteristics, organizational role. Outline topic, interview process Anonimity and consent
SCOME task responsibilities	Please describe your role as a respective SCOME in your organization. *What is your formal job title within your organization?* *What are your main tasks and responsibilities?*
Organization	Business and SCM: *How is supply chain management organized in your organization?* *How does your supply chain perform?*
Examplars	Asking, based on previous answers, about examples of actions engaged in: *What situation urged you to respond rapidly to changes or disruptions?* *How do you manage incidents when they arise?* *How do you implement your strategies?*
Performance	*What are the performance impacts of your actions? How successful were you in achieving your objectives?* *What achievements make you a successful leader?* *What KPI's do you keep in mind at work?*
Wrap-up	*Are there any other insights you would like to share?*