I have worked over a year on this graduation thesis. What started as an idea to research process management in public-private partnerships ended in an extensive and complex research on leadership in urban development projects. Overall, this year has been great. It was challenging, dynamic and refreshing. My graduation company AT Osborne contributed to this experience with a huge amount of knowledge, practical examples and a very nice working atmosphere.

In this chapter, I would like to reflect on obstacles and experiences of the past year. First, (1) I will review the interviews and what I encountered in the conversations with leaders in urban development projects. In paragraph 2, I will elaborate on the difficulties with translating information of the case study from Dutch into English and the transition between varying tasks. In the last paragraph (3), I will reflect on how I dealt with criticism and input, and I will conclude with a reflection on the learning goals I set almost 12 months ago.

1. Interviewing leaders
Simply stated, this research is about leaders in an urban development project that are asked to tell me something about their leadership and the leadership of others. This reveals that the research is dependent on two factors: are the actors willing to make time to see me? And if so, are they prepared to talk?

The first factor, to approach and convince leaders to participate in my study, was my biggest concern when I started. This concern was partly confirmed as I did not find enough participants for the third case. It appeared to be an accessible project, but it turned out that especially the higher level executives were not prepared to have a conversation with me about their leadership. Due to time limitations at the end of this research, it was not possible to persuade them. This was a disappointment, since I already prepared the case and did four interviews. This took me about two weeks, which affected the planning of the research. The other two cases turned out better than expected and almost all the actors were willing to participate in the research.

When the leaders were prepared to talk to me (second factor) and we were doing the interview, they were (in general) nice, open and cooperative. They started to think about their personal leadership and the leadership of others in response to my questions. This was a very interesting process to witness, since the respondents got new insights about themselves during the interview. I think they sometimes got caught up in the moment and that they intended to be more reserved about the information they wanted to give. This could also explain why they often tried to change or delete personal details afterwards in the summary of the interview.

However, for me it was hard to execute the interviews, especially in the beginning of this research. This was caused by two things: I did not have much experience with interview technique and it was difficult to ask critical questions. Within AT Osborne, several colleagues, who are leaders in urban development projects themselves, helped me to practice my interview technique, and also helped me with testing the structure of my interviews. By listening to the sound recordings, I could reflect on my own questioning technique. This beginning phase was crucial in the research process in order to make sure that I was well prepared for the ‘real’ interviews. It was hard to ask critical questions because there was a large variety of leaders that I interviewed. However, they had one thing in common: they were older and more experienced than me. It was, therefore, difficult to offer them a critical reflection on their personal leadership style; it was hard to criticize their work with my limited experience. Luckily, this was not the main objective of the research, and the respondents were prepared to answer all my questions which helped me analyze the impasses.
2. Translation and transition
At the beginning of this research I made the choice to write this thesis in English, since the literature on this topic and my masters both were in English. What I did not foresee was that all the interviews were in Dutch, and, therefore, every word in the case study needed to be translated into English. With this translation the liveliness of the text decreases and it sometimes caused language deficiencies in the text, so I needed to pay extra attention to my writing.

In the research process, multiple activities had to be done at the same time: preparing the interviews, writing chapters for the thesis and preparing the cases. The transition between the cases was especially difficult, since the content and the details got tangled up in my head. However, the variety of activities also made sure that I did not get bored and that I was (almost) always enthusiastic and positive about my work.

3. Intrinsic drive and external input
When I chose for this topic, I knew that I did not choose the easy way. Leadership development and self-reflection in urban area development are relatively unknown in the literature and in practice. However, this did not scare me off because I had a strong drive to explore this area, a fascination for leadership and I like challenges. A downside of choosing this topic is that almost every angle of the research needs to be framed, since it is impossible to do everything. Even though I intended to determine the structure of this research at an early stage, I needed to make daily decisions concerning the direction of the research and which way I wanted to go. It was not always possible to make very well-considered decisions, because the research had to continue. When I reflect on these decisions, I do not regret any of them: they are in line with each other and they represent an interesting way of examining the topic. However, due to the explorative nature of the research, the research does not directly provide an answer to the difficulties in urban development projects, to which I would have liked to contribute. Nevertheless, this research can be the start of a new line of research, so that future students in this field are able to bring this theory a step further and to develop practically applicable tools.

Besides my personal drive for this topic, I also got to know myself as a determined and self-confident person. Since I tried to follow my own fascination and intuition, I did not immediately accept suggestions or input from my mentors and other readers. I would review the source of their critics and consequently accept their suggestions or strengthen my motivation for why that aspect is not included. In addition to my mentors of the Delft Technical University and AT Osborne, I also invited several other people from different fields of expertise to give comments on my work. Besides the point that it was not always easy to receive and listen to critique on my work, the critics helped me to push the limits and to strengthen my reasoning.

My personal learning goal was to gain experience of how to perform research. And indeed I did experience the ups and downs of doing research. Characteristics of discipline, independency and persistency have shown themselves to be very important, maybe even crucial: the discipline to stick to my planning, the independency to stay close to myself and my fascination and persistency to convince people to participate in the study. With this research, I hope to have shown these characteristics to my readers, embodied in a report in which I put my heart and soul.