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# ORGANIZATIONS AS SYSTEMS IN CRISIS: CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIORS OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERS

Dennis Paul Gonzales

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**ORGANIZATIONS AS SYSTEMS IN CRISIS: CHARACTERISTICS AND  
BEHAVIORS OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERS  
A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATORY STUDY**

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December 2011**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my life partner of 19 years, Mr. Myron Tanuz, who has selflessly encouraged and supported me at every step along this wondrous journey.

To my grandmother, Mrs. Dolores B. Gonzales, who helped instill in me an appreciation and intense desire for learning since I was a small child. Thank you, Granny.

And to my parents, Mr. Joseph Dwight Gonzales and Mrs. Mary Louise Gonzales, who sacrificed so much to give me the wonderful opportunities I have been blessed with throughout my educational career.

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**ABSTRACT**

Given the increasingly complex and fluid nature of organizations today, there is an urgent need to study the role that leadership can play in helping organizations to successfully navigate through difficult and turbulent times.

This dissertation investigated the journey of six participants who served as leaders in organizations during periods of change and turmoil. An interpretive phenomenological approach was the primary method of data collection, analysis, and interpretation used to organize the data gathered primarily through interviews with the participants. Personal experience, as well as current leadership and change theories served as the background and frame of reference for this study. Extensive interviews were conducted with each participant. The transcripts from those interviews were carefully analyzed, resulting in a rich description of each individual lived experience. Finally, the individual lived experiences of the participants were analyzed in order to arrive at a composite review, or universal experience,



of the participants. Key findings indicated that a leader's worldview is a significant determining factor in their responses to the interview questions.

Some common leadership qualities that emerged from the data include: embracing change, collaboration, effective communication, thinking globally, developing others, managerial courage, and ongoing reflection. Additional results pointed to the importance of transparency, dialogue, accountability and inclusivity in an organization, especially during periods of change. Finally, the results suggest that a successful leader appreciates the value of networking, willpower, flexibility, and creative chaos in the organizations that they manage. This exploratory study warrants further investigation, especially regarding the influence of empowerment, managerial courage, reflection, systems-thinking, and creative chaos in organizations.

Findings from this study may also provide leaders with suggestions on how to be more effective as they attempt to guide organizations in these unpredictable and rapidly changing times. Rooted in a systems-oriented theoretical framework and using an interpretive phenomenological approach, this qualitative exploratory study offers an example for future researchers focusing on the role leaders play in helping organizations to succeed in turbulent times.

## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Chapter I Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Background and Context for the Study.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
The Question.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	9
Assumptions.....	11
Limitations.....	11
<b>Chapter II Literature Review.....</b>	<b>13</b>
Introduction.....	13
The Changing Role of Leadership.....	13
The Complexity of Change.....	18
Developing Effective Leadership.....	25
Moving Toward a Culture of Change.....	30
<b>Chapter III Methods.....</b>	<b>37</b>
Research Questions.....	37
Methodological Design.....	37
Selection of Participants.....	41
Description of the Participants.....	42
Sarah.....	42

David. ....	43
Steve. ....	44
Diego. ....	45
Miranda. ....	46
Dolores. ....	47
Researcher Perspective .....	48
Literature Review.....	49
Confidentiality and Ethical Concerns .....	51
Interviews.....	51
Interview Protocol.....	53
Data Analysis .....	54
Validity and Reliability.....	56
Summary.....	57
<b>Chapter IV Results and Discussion.....</b>	<b>58</b>
Primary Research Question.....	58
Introduction.....	59
In their own words. ....	60
Leadership Qualities .....	64
Sub-question One.....	64
Collaborative.....	65
Good communicator.....	67
Thinks globally. ....	69
Develops others.....	71

Managerial courage.....	74
Reflection.....	76
Significant differences. ....	78
Culture, Power, and Politics.....	81
Culture.....	83
Power. ....	88
Politics.....	92
Complex Adaptive Systems, Quantum Physics, and Self-organizing Systems.....	96
Complex Adaptive Systems.....	98
Quantum Physics. ....	102
Self-organizing Systems. ....	105
Summary.....	109
<b>Chapter V Conclusions.....</b>	<b>111</b>
Summary of Study .....	112
Universal Theme: Worldview.....	113
Leadership qualities. ....	114
Culture, Power, and Politics.....	121
Complex Adaptive Systems, Quantum Physics, and Self-organizing Systems. ....	124
Contributions.....	127
Implications for practice. ....	127
Significance of the study.....	131
Limitations and reflections on methodology. ....	135

Suggestions for future research.....	137
Conclusion .....	140
<b>References .....</b>	<b>142</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 3.1: Interview protocol for participants in exploratory research study .....	53
Figure 4.1: What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide an organization through periods of change? .....	65
Figure 4.2: What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences? .....	83
Figure 4.3: How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret these experiences? ....	98
Figure 5.1: What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide an organization through periods of change? .....	115
Figure 5.2: What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences? .....	122
Figure 5.3: How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret these experiences? ..	125

# Chapter I

## Introduction

### Background and Context for the Study

As a student of organizational development, I have been continually fascinated with the topic of leadership in organizations. Throughout my professional and academic career, it has been a keen interest of mine to delve, discover, and deliberate over the critical role that leaders play in all types of organizations - large and small, private and public, for profit and not for profit. At the same time, my professional experiences have underscored the everyday realities of the impact that leadership can have on organizational life. I have not only read, studied, and written about the topic of organizational leadership; I have lived it in my work experiences over the years. In particular, I have developed what Creswell (2007) calls an “intense curiosity” about the role that leadership does and can play in an organization that is experiencing periods of turmoil, change, and transition. That keen curiosity ultimately led me to embark on this exploratory study.

In order to address the question of leadership in organizations, however, one must first conceptualize how leadership fits into the greater scheme of organizational learning and development overall. In that regard, it is often a difficult task to explain what organizational learning (or organizational development) *is*. One possible definition that seems to make sense comes from Argyris & Schon (1996) and suggests that organizational learning comes about when individuals in an organization encounter a problematic situation in the organization, learn as a result of inquiries into that situation, and then that learning becomes embedded in the images of the organization. That learning, they assert, is held in the

members' minds and/or epistemological artifacts embedded in the organization's culture and environment.

Bolman & Deal (2003), in their book *Reframing Organizations*, talk about the organizational environment and culture in terms of the various structures, or frames, that make up organizations. Specifically, they speak about the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames that make up every organization. The structural frame refers to the actual make up of the organization, including its physical building, work spaces, hierarchy, technological structures and networks, and locations. The human resource frame is primarily concerned about the regulations and benefits in an organization as well as all the typically HR policies and procedures – who is recruited and how are they evaluated and retained? The political frame is concerned with the complex power relationships that exist within every organization. It speaks to the various coalitions, battles, and campaigns that form and wage in organizations. Finally, the symbolic frame concerns itself with the history, legends, mission, and values of every organization. I would suggest that the power of symbolism is often overlooked, but can be a very effective instrument to bring about and sustain change. The results of this study appear to support the assertion that symbolism in organizations, especially concerning the areas of mission and values, is critical in creating and sustaining effective leadership.

In looking at the many different and complicated definitions of organizational learning, as well as the various theories, frames, and approaches discussed throughout the professional and academic literature, the following simple question can be asked: What is the common thread or themes running through the research? The answer is twofold: Leadership.....and, inevitably, Change. Therefore, I decided to focus my research on the



role that leadership plays in bringing about positive and/or transformational change in organizations. I would suggest that two things are certain in any organization: change will happen, gradual or abrupt; and, leadership will be central and critically important as to what the end result will be from that change. In order for an organization to successfully navigate change, it requires strong and effective leadership. As Argyris & Schon (1996) suggest, the learning resulting from problematic situations must become *embedded* in the minds of individuals and in the artifacts of an organization if organizational learning is to occur. Only then can transformational change take place.

Watkins (1996) also suggests that learning by individuals is necessary for an organization to change, but it's not sufficient. Organizational development requires *effective* leadership. Learning must become embedded in the minds of individuals, as well as in the artifacts of the organization in order for change and transformation to take place. It is a primary role of leaders in any organization to foster, encourage, and nurture that learning. Only through effective leadership will the organization be able to align its espoused theory with its theory in use. The espoused theory is what the organization claims to believe, follow and value. It is slow to change. The organization's theory in use refers to the real-life, everyday practices that the organization actually follows. They are quicker to change, and may or may not be in line with the espoused theory. Aligning these two aspects of the organization is one of the greatest challenges for leadership – especially in periods of significant change and transition. As the data show in this study, the importance of developing others and embracing change cannot be underestimated.

It is the responsibility of leaders in an organization to encourage a positive, safe environment that encourages and rewards risk-taking by the employees. Leadership will

create the fertile soil in which not only to plant and cultivate a true learning organization, but also the fertile soil in which to cultivate new and future leaders. How can leaders accomplish this monumental task? Only through the coordination of espoused theory, theory in practice, and the power relationships that exist in their organization. These relationships are a constant tick that affect everything else that happens in the organization.

From the standpoint of Complex Adaptive Systems Theory, leadership may be viewed as the catalyst that encourages, supports, and pushes these relationships to the edge of chaos in order to bring about transformational learning in an organization. This must be accomplished within the context of the many complex relationships that exist within that organization. This suggestion has gained further support as a result of this study, which demonstrated the integral roles of networking, empowerment, and systems thinking within organizations, especially during periods of great change.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This intense curiosity about the role that leadership plays in organizational learning and transformational change has arisen from my own personal experiences in a variety of organizations. Over the years, I have personally experienced a series of what Mezirow (2000) would call “disorienting dilemmas.” These intense experiences were rooted in the workplace as a result of significant change and transition. Throughout each of those experiences, I was a witness and participant as leadership in those organizations struggled to navigate the difficult circumstances they faced. In each instance, change was thrust upon the organization both internally and externally. While the outcomes were unique to the various organizations (not all survived), in each instance the role of leadership was central to that outcome.

As an educator in three different Catholic schools in El Paso, Santa Fe, and San Diego, I witnessed the incredible challenges that leadership faced in coming to terms with the fact that the stewardship of the organization had to change as a result of declining numbers of vowed religious or clergy. Each of these Catholic high schools faced this problem. As a result, the cultures of the organizations were forced to adapt and transform themselves from a religious-run model to a lay-run model. Leadership had to be passed from the vowed religious or clergy to the layperson. Such a change created intense struggles, fear, despair, and confusion as power relationships and questions of identity, mission, and vision emerged.

In my role as an educational consultant for a private corporation in Southern California, I witnessed a similar scenario. The organization had grown to be very large and profitable by primarily providing professional consulting services to the parties involved in workers' compensation cases. We served as consultants to injured workers, applicant attorneys, employers, insurance carriers, and defense attorneys. Suddenly, with the recall of Governor Davis and the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger, the state government of California completely overhauled the workers' compensation system. Consulting services became virtually irrelevant as the new legislation encouraged injured workers to waive their vocational rehabilitation benefits in favor of one-time cash settlements directly from the insurance carriers. Once again, organizational leadership had to help the company to either change, adapt and transform – or die.

Yet again, I was able to witness the role of leadership and change as I made the transition to an organizational development position in a healthcare organization. The private, not-for-profit hospital I worked for had recently partnered with a large Catholic, not-for-profit healthcare system. This alliance, while allowing for greater resources and shared

best practices to help survive the current economic crisis, had created a workplace environment in which associates were unsure of the organization's new identity, mission, and direction. The leadership of the organization was called upon to facilitate the period of transformation and change resulting from otherwise unanticipated external and internal forces. Would the organization come out of the transformation leaner, stronger, and better, or would it be pulled apart and demoralized in the difficult process of merging? Leadership's performance would largely determine the answer to that question.

In addition to my own personal and professional experiences, as a student of organizational development, I have discovered that there is a need in the field for further studies focusing on less traditional views of leadership theory. Much has been written and studied about leadership through the more traditional lens where organizations are neatly structured as reflected in the all too common organizational chart. While there is a great deal of literature on leadership theory, much of that work focuses on human resources, structure, and command and control processes. Less attention has been paid to the symbolic and political aspects of leadership, especially around mission, values, change management, systems-thinking, and reflection. In order to add to the body of research in these areas, I have undertaken this study.

### **The Question**

This experience-based curiosity, as well as the need in the field for further research on the less traditional aspects of leadership and change management, finally led me to embark on the current journey, on which I have completed an exploratory study on the following question: *What role does leadership in organizations play in successfully pushing*

*an organization to the edge (embracing chaos or disequilibrium) in order to affect positive change and/or transformation?*

In relation to this overall question, I worked with the participants in considering the following three sub-questions:

1. What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide an organization through periods of change?
2. What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences?
3. How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret those experiences?

### **Purpose of the Study**

Upon undertaking this journey, I hoped to contribute to the body of research in organizational leadership, specifically on the question of the role of leadership in times of crisis, change, and transformation. My goal was to arrive at a useful description of the “universal experience” of individuals who have had similar individual experiences. My expectation was that, in so doing, perhaps some light could be shed on the complex and unique role that leadership played in those experiences and develop a better common understanding of different approaches that leadership has used during those challenging times. In addition to adding to the body of knowledge related to organizational leadership, I anticipated that this research would add to the theories of complex adaptive systems, chaos, organizational learning, and self-organizing systems.

As will be discussed in great detail in Chapters Four and Five, the data from this exploratory study demonstrate the importance of effective leadership in organizations, especially during turbulent times. Of particular interest, the results of this study suggest that

the worldview of leaders is central to their effectiveness in organizations. Similarly, the data point to the need for leaders to focus less on command and control, directive processes and more on collaboration, empowerment, global thinking, influence, improved communication skills, and the development of their staff. Finally, another unique finding from this study indicates that effective leaders also must look *internally*, through reflection, adept perception, and focused willpower in order to be successful

### **Theoretical Framework**

A systems perspective was used to frame this study. Specifically, I relied on the central concepts of Complex Adaptive Systems Theory, Quantum Physics, and Self-organizing Systems Theory throughout the course of this exploratory study. Based on the premise that an organization is but one complex and dynamic system that is constantly interacting with countless other systems, the focus of this exploratory study was to arrive at a universal description of the lived experiences of the participants within those systems. A deeper understanding of the system in which the participants lived and worked was at the heart of the research. As each organizational system is unique, a wide variety and complex collection of views has emerged from the study.

A goal of my research has been to focus as much as possible on the particular lived experiences of the participants and their own perceptions of those experiences, as well as how the participants have been affected by the environments and the many external forces and dynamic systemic interactions at play throughout those individual experiences.

In so doing, I have attempted to “generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21) from the research. The interviews conducted in this study consisted of open ended questions and allowed for free responses from the participants. Such

an approach provided the participants with an opportunity to freely describe an understanding and explanation of their lived experiences through this interaction with me as the researcher. The rich descriptions that resulted incorporate the many interrelated systemic influences that are embedded in the experiences of the participants.

Finally, I have positioned myself as the researcher where my own personal and professional lived experiences helped to inform and interpret the meanings that emerged from the descriptions of the participants. In that role, I have presented my representation and interpretation not only of the individual lived experiences of the participants but also of the universal experience of those participants as they led their organizational systems through turbulent times. A more robust discussion on the propositions and implications of systems theory is presented in Chapter Two.

### **Significance of the Study**

As noted above, of the many possible definitions of organizational learning identified in the literature, the one proposed by Argyris & Schon (1996) seems to make a great deal of sense:

Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on the organization's behalf. In order to become organizational, the learning that results from organizational inquiry must become embedded in the images of the organization held in its members' minds and/or in the epistemological artifacts (the maps, memories, and programs) embedded in the organizational environment. (p. 2)

One key distinction that must be made regarding this understanding is the difference between "organizational learning" and the "learning organization." One may refer to these terms as a

verb and a noun, respectfully. Secondly, it is apparent that in order for the organization to *learn*, the new knowledge must, in fact, become *embedded* in the minds of the members of the organization as well as in the systems of the organization itself. In today's corporate culture, this is often referred to as knowledge management. This study addresses issues involving knowledge management in general, as well as the implications of change management specifically.

One of the central concepts that emerges when discussing organizational development is the relationship between leadership and organizational learning. According to more traditional theories of learning, learners will learn independently of extrinsic forces and, therefore, so too should an organization. Many scholars have tended to view the organization *as* the learner, much as we would view the individual, or student. Learning by individuals is necessary for the organization to change, but not sufficient (Watkins, 1996). As such, the impact of organizational leadership cannot be underestimated in organizational learning. This exploratory study also concentrated on the role that leadership plays in creating a learning organization capable of adapting and changing in the face of apparent turmoil or chaos.

As the results of this study confirm, leadership can make the difference between an organization stuck in single-loop learning (error correction), one that allows its espoused theories to change and evolve (double-loop learning), or can reflect on its own learning process (deutero or triple-loop learning). Peschl (2007) asserts that triple loop learning is a necessary foundation, or domain, for profound change in organizations:

Philosophically, one can refer to this domain as the 'person.' It goes beyond the level of personal skills, competencies, personality, etc. because it transcends the domain of



personality traits, behavioral and cognitive patterns, solely quantifiable data, etc. It touches the person on his/her fundamental level of being and, in many cases, concerns the domain of *wisdom*. (p. 138)

Only through triple-loop learning can learned results to organizational inquiry become embedded in the minds of the members, as well as in the culture and systems of the organization itself. Organizational leadership that fosters double-loop and triple loop learning is critical for organizational transformation to occur. This exploratory study has directly addressed questions of the impact of profound change on organizations and the role that leaders play in helping those organizations to succeed in such turbulent times.

### **Assumptions**

My primary assumption prior to conducting this exploratory study was that there is, in fact, a universal experience that individuals have when leadership in organizations attempts to navigate the troubled waters of change, turmoil, and transition. My goal was to arrive at a composite textural-structural description of that universal experience. Secondly, I assumed that each participant, like myself, had lived the experience of drastic and difficult organizational change and was able to describe that experience. Lastly, I assumed that each participant was keenly interested in the research questions involved and in discovering what those universal essences might be.

### **Limitations**

In my preparations for beginning this phenomenological research study, I seriously considered who the participants in the study might be. I decided on 6 participants: two individuals from the corporate world, two individuals from educational organizations (one for-profit and one not-for-profit), and two individuals from the healthcare industry. A

potential limitation was that I am familiar with all the participants, as I have personally worked with most over the years. This familiarity, while it made the data collection somewhat easier to arrange, was openly acknowledged and carefully considered as I attempted to formulate an objective, fresh view of the lived experiences of the participants. I believe that this task is something I have achieved in this study.

A second potential limitation for this study was the need to provide significant background information to the participants about current leadership, change and other theories. Although each potential participant had the educational background and intellectual curiosity to grasp and appreciate those theories, it did require that I carefully formulate a comprehensive Consent to Participate document prior to conducting the interviews, as well as extensive one-on-one explanations of the purpose of the study. I also set aside some time during the interviews themselves to answer any questions the participants may have had about the study. As a life-long educator, this was not difficult, but it did require careful planning.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

Enabling leaders can impose tension by dropping ‘seeds of emergence’ or perturbations that have the potential of fostering learning and creativity. Such ‘seeds’ include ideas, information, judiciously placed resources, new people, and the capacity to access unspecified resources. ...Seeds are intended to stimulate the networked system, and their impact may be unpredictable. (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007, p. 311)

#### **Introduction**

Presented below is a comprehensive literature review addressing the role that leaders play in helping organizations to succeed in turbulent times. Particular attention is paid to prevailing theories on leadership, change management, complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems. As a result of the findings in this exploratory study, additional pertinent literature and theoretical propositions have been identified. An extensive discussion of those connections and implications to our field of study is presented in Chapter Five.

#### **The Changing Role of Leadership**

As indicated in the passage above, the role of leadership in organizations is clearly evolving. In order to survive in the rapidly changing climate that exists today, organizations have been forced to move away from the traditional command and control model of leadership toward a new, more organic approach. This more comprehensive view of organizational theory has led many organizational development experts to describe organizations as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) in which leadership plays a very

different, though critical, role. If an organization functions as a complex adaptive system, that is one in which a variety of forces are interacting with one another in a cyclical and iterative fashion with frequently unknown or unintended consequences, how can leadership influence and guide that organization? According to Schneider & Somers (2006), “The new form organization, in which leadership relies less upon managerial authority, and a new set of ideas that transcends the physical, biological, and social sciences, referred to as Complexity Theory, has entered the realm of leadership research” (p. 351).

In this new “realm” of leadership research, leaders within an organization are encouraged to serve as catalysts, or tags, who consistently push the organization to the edge of chaos, which is where true change and transformation can happen. In that zone of complexity, organizational identity and social movements can serve as mediating variables between leadership and organizational emergence. Leadership might come to affect other variables as well, in the iterative interactions of variables which characterize dynamic systems (Schneider & Somers, 2006). The more traditional role of leadership as an independent director and dictator of events has evolved into a model in which leadership affects change and transformation in an indirect and often uncertain fashion.

In a complex adaptive system, leadership relies on organizational identity, apparent chaos, social networks, and interdependent emergent outcomes:

...leaders serve as tags and influence other persons and processes. They frequently lead without authority and often do so in a temporary capacity. Leaders might consciously initiate their leadership role, or might accept the role that has been given to them. Leaders might be unaware of their role, as others might also be unaware, but nonetheless leaders might emerge. As tags are associated with action and outcomes,

not necessarily with individuals or positions, one might co-function as leader, sharing the role in tandem. (p. 356)

In such a complex organizational system, the role of leadership becomes equally complex, organic and fluid. How can leadership be effective in such a seemingly unpredictable environment – or is it simply a matter of chance? If we agree, as complexity theorists assert, that there is a sense of order at a higher level in any complex adaptive system, what advice can leaders be given to help them on their journey? The results of this exploratory study clearly support the assertion that the most important role of a leader in organizations is that of influence. Leaders must engender and encourage collaboration, communication, staff development, and global thinking.

Bolman & Deal (2006), in *The Wizard and the Warrior: Leading with Passion and Power*, suggest that leadership in organizations typically only focuses on two of the four frames: structure and human resources. While these are, of course, very important and valuable areas in organizational development, the “two other frames – political and symbolic – are required to make sense of the rolling, moving targets that organizations serve up everyday” (Bolman & Deal, 2006, p. 2). The main reason why leaders of organizations tend to shy away from these two critical areas is that they are afraid of conflict and “have an even harder time grasping the elusive and mysterious influence of symbols” (Bolman & Deal, 2006, p. 2). This did not surprise me in the least, and only served to support my belief that politics and culture are two of the most powerful, yet most ignored, forces in any organization. This belief has been further confirmed by the results of this study, which point to the incredible power of mission, values, unified leadership, and dialogue in effective organizations.

In illustrating their point, Bolman & Deal (2006) have chosen to quite vividly portray leaders in these two frames as warriors (political frame) and wizards (symbolic frame). “The warrior’s world is a place of combat, of allies and antagonists, courage and cowardice, honor and betrayal, strength and weakness” (p. 3). No organization can be effective without strong and capable warriors. Wizards, on the other hand, “bring imagination, creativity, meaning, and magic. The tools of the wizard’s trade are values, icons, ritual, ceremonies, and stories that weave day-to-day details of life together in a meaningful symbolic tapestry” (Bolman & Deal, 2006, p. 3). Any organization that does not have effective and talented wizards will become lifeless, boring, and seemingly adrift. Ultimately, any successful leader must master both roles, or ally herself with someone who is skilled in the shadowing role. Similar to the concepts presented in most of the other sources researched in this literature review, these roles work in conjunction with one another; they represent cognition and emotion, power and passion, intellect and emotional intelligence.

Bolman & Deal (2006) suggest that there are three types of warriors: toxic, relentless, and principled. The toxic leader (Leona Helmsley, Richard Nixon) destroys more than they create and is self-absorbed and consumed by their own power and influence. Relentless leaders (Bill Gates, George Patton) are more disciplined; they are into gamesmanship. They push the situation to the brink, but rarely go too far. Principled warriors (Abraham Lincoln, Warren Buffett) are passionate about their goals and values; however, they see battle as a last option. They will fight if necessary, but do not find it a desirable or attractive scenario. The text gives very interesting biographies of a large number of individuals from all walks of life that have exhibited these qualities in our history.

Similarly, there are three types of wizards: harmful, wannabe, and authentic. The harmful wizard (Jim Jones, Hitler) has self-serving or evil goals. They are acutely aware of the power of symbolism, but they use these tools for manipulation, senseless chaos, and destructive ends. The wannabe wizards (Ken Lay, Woodrow Wilson) “veer off the road when their bold new ideas go nose-to-nose with traditional values and entrenched cultural ways” (Bolman & Deal, 2006, p. 104). Although they may have great intentions and plans, they are easily tripped up by unforeseen issues and problems. The authentic wizard (Barack Obama, Norman Schwarzkopf) are aware of their inner passions and are able to inspire others to join them in their crusade. In the final analysis, while each role is necessary, the ideal leader will have strong abilities, sometimes called emotional intelligence, to play *both* roles in an authentic and principled manner.

In *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman & McKee (2002) cleverly weave this idea of emotional intelligence into the fabric of leadership abilities. For an organizational development student and professional, this makes perfect sense. As the authors state, “At its root, then, the primal job of leadership is emotional” (p. 9). This fundamental premise permeates the entire text and is consolidated with evidence from business, science, education, psychology, and organizational development. Have leadership studies missed the point by focusing more on structural, external characteristics of organizations and less on the internal, affective qualities of leaders? It is a valid and intriguing question to ask, and one which this study has helped to answer.

The basic research questions that these authors strive to answer are crucial to the development of effective leadership specifically and effective organizations overall: What emotional resources do leaders need to thrive amidst chaos and turbulent change? What

gives a leader the inner strength to be honest about even painful truths? What enables a leader to inspire others to do their best work and to stay loyal when other jobs beckon? How do leaders create an emotional climate that fosters creative innovations, superior performance, or warm and lasting customer relationships? The answer to each of these questions is: emotional intelligence. This is not to discount the value of intellect; rather, they suggest that the two intelligences work very closely together (as is demonstrated by the latest brain research). However, the authors do point out that in a crisis, it is the emotional center of our brain that usually takes control. This not so subtly suggests that perhaps emotional intelligence is more important than traditional intellect. You cannot become a leader without the intellectual power, yet you will not become a highly effective leader without the emotional intelligence.

As supported by the results of this study, emotional intelligence is critical to the success or failure of a leader. Many of these competencies are intertwined as well; one builds upon and fleshes out the other, giving rise to an individual who can truly work to create an organizational culture of collaboration, trust, respect, passionate workers, and organizational effectiveness. The data in this study also suggest two additional points: first, these skills are not only valuable for leaders of organizations, but also for every human being as we interact with our families, friends, and communities; and, second, there is also the opposite or converse quality to each of these competencies, which will create a toxic environment and hinder success. We must be mindful of both.

### **The Complexity of Change**

Kezar (2005) presents a very detailed discussion about a grounded theory study looking into the consequences of radical change in the approach to governance at the



university level. The author begins by asserting that the discussion about *whether* or not the approach to governance in universities will change is now basically moot. The question before us now is *how* it will change in order to adapt to the current challenges. According to the literature review, most proponents for radical change believe that it is “necessary and desirable for creating a more functional and successful process of campus governance” (Kezar, 2005, p. 635). The few studies that are exceptions to this position suggest that such radical change can only be successful if it takes into account the unique culture of each organization, eliminating the possibility of designing some “universal-type” governance approach for all universities. It comes as a surprise that the author asserts that there is very little literature on the topic, indicating an area of study that is ripe for research by students of organizational development.

Kezar (2005) presents an excellent and thorough review of two theories of change: teleological and political. The teleological theory of change suggests that radical change is common and necessary for all organizations to be successful. On the other hand, the political theory argues that “organizations pass through long periods of evolutionary change and short periods of second-order or revolutionary change, when there is an impasse between two perspectives or ideologies” (Baldrige, 1971, 1983; Morgan, 1986). For the purposes of the Kezar (2005) study, “radical change” is defined as a rapid and complete departure from the existing orientation and the entire transformation of organizing principles and structures. The focus of Kezar’s study is on both the intended and unintended consequences/outcomes of such radical change in the university setting. Regarding methodology, Kezar used a combination of the grounded theory approach and case study.

The study found that radical change requires a great deal of individual and organizational adjustment and flexibility – much more than most people are able to handle. Ideally, one would practically need to be able to tell the future and predict problems that will arise – a virtual impossibility. Additionally, there are certain to be a host of issues and problems that arise which are unique to the culture of any particular organization. In that vein, the study finds a variety of negative or problematic, outcomes especially concerning a lack of direction from leadership, little accountability on the part of the stakeholders, a power shift among interest groups, and a general resistance to the change overall. While these are serious concerns that must be addressed if any organization is to embark on a radical change process, Kezar does make the comment that it may ultimately be unavoidable, or these issues may have existed anyway prior to the change.

Even though the final conclusion of the study is that radical change rarely works, the study does uncover some positive outcomes as well, although expressed by a small minority of the participants. These positive outcomes include more effective forums for dialogue and decision making, increased buy-in by a few, increased collaboration. and a greater alignment of organizational mission and values. These are, indeed, very positive outcomes. However, it must be noted that they were reported by participants who also experienced an increase in their own power and influence as a result of the organizational change. I would not discount these positive outcomes, as it is quite possible that the shift in power and influence was necessary for organizational success.

The main conclusion of this study is that radical change has many negative consequences. It is argued that gradual change and innovation appear to have the greater potential for success since people, who after all make up organizations, need time to adjust,

adapt, and accept change. This conclusion runs counter to the proposition put forth by Business Process Reengineering (BPR), but it is consistent with the political, cultural, and institutional theories about change.

The findings within this grounded theory study suggest that “the frustration, lowered morale, distrust, and confusion that emerged as a result of the radical change process can be crippling to an organization” (Kezar, 2005, p. 662). While I would agree that this is certainly a real possibility, I would also argue that when radical change is needed, it usually means that the people in the organization are *already* “crippled” due to the initial ineffectiveness of the governance structure. The question before us, for the purposes of this exploratory study, is how can leadership help to guide organizations successfully through such periods of change and transformation? The results from this study suggest that radical change is more difficult to manage and can cause irreparable damage to morale and motivation. The organizations that survived in the experiences of our participants were able to adapt to the change that confronted them in a methodical and planned manner, relying on collaboration, communication, and an unwavering commitment to mission. As our participants described it, leaders can either help or hinder this transitional period.

As we noted earlier in this discussion, Complex Adaptive Systems Theory has given rise to a new perspective on the role that leadership plays in times of change and apparent chaos. Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey (2007) have taken this idea even further. They talk about Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) as a new model to describe the true complexity of the continuous and unpredictable interactions that take place in organizational systems where leadership serves as catalysts (tags) for change, growth and adaptation:

We address this challenge by developing a model of leadership grounded not in bureaucracy, but in complexity. This model focuses on leadership in contexts of dynamically changing networks of informally interacting agents...the premise of complexity leadership is simple: Under conditions of knowledge production, managers should *enable*, rather than suppress or align, informal network dynamics...This new perspective is grounded in a core proposition: *Much of leadership thinking has failed to recognize that leadership is not merely the influential act of an individual or individuals but rather is embedded in a complex interplay of numerous interacting forces.* (p. 302)

The authors point to the need for “enabling leaders” who support creativity and adaptive behavior in their organizations. These leaders strive to protect the organization from anything, internal or external, that might hamper the creative process and work to build a structure (mission, physical conditions, interpersonal relationships, power, politics, dialogue, etc.) that will support and encourage emergent ideas.

Taking this discussion to another level, Wheatley’s (2006) *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* does an excellent job of taking the three scientific theories of quantum physics, self-organizing systems, and chaos theory, and applying them to present-day leadership research in organizational development. This discussion seems to flow seamlessly from the research described above on Complex Adaptive Systems Theory and Complexity Leadership Theory. While each of these three fields of study in science is vast and complex, there are certain central concepts from each that pertain specifically to this exploratory study.

Quantum physics suggests that there is an invisible force or field that surrounds everything in the universe. Relationship is the key determiner of everything. Subatomic particles come into form and are observed only as they are in relationship to something else. They do not exist as independent “things.” Thus, reality does not exist until it is perceived to exist by someone. These unseen connections between what were previously thought to be separate entities are the fundamental ingredient of all creation. We are able to change, affect, and influence reality by using our positive, yet powerful, thoughts and intentions. We can quite literally will events and transformations in our reality; in fact, we are physically hard-wired in our brains to do so.

Chaos theory has led to a new appreciation of the relationship between order and chaos. The two forces are now understood as mirror images; two states that contain the other. A system can descend into apparent chaos and unpredictability, yet within that state of chaos the system is held within boundaries that are well-ordered and predictable. Without the partnering of these two great forces no change or progress is possible. Chaos is necessary for new creative ordering.

Self-organizing systems theory suggests that the survival and growth of systems (from the universe to the Earth, to nations, to organizations, and even an individual organism) is sustained by a few key principles that express the system’s overall identity combined with high levels of autonomy for individuals within that system. Any open system has the capacity to respond to change and disorder by reorganizing itself at a higher level. Disorder becomes a critical player, an ally that can provoke a system to self-organize into new forms of being. The various ice-ages are examples of this in action at the planetary level.

Wheatley (2006) elaborates a great deal on each of these “new sciences” and demonstrates that the key ingredients in every one of them are those of interrelatedness, interconnectedness, the ability to re-organize and adapt, the natural role of chaos or disorder in the universe, and the higher-level orderliness or boundaries that actually do exist, though not readily apparent to us. The results of this exploratory study indicated a remarkable agreement with the central concepts of the “new sciences” described above. Key findings in this study suggest that in order for leaders to be successful they must appreciate the value and importance of networking, the empowerment of staff, sheer willpower, the interrelatedness of existence, flexibility, global thinking, and the creative opportunities that can arise from change and/or apparent chaos.

Having established the basic principles behind the three new sciences, Wheatley (2006) then illustrates how those very same principles can be applied to the concept of leadership in organizational theory specifically. She very eloquently makes the following key points:

- Leadership, an amorphous phenomenon that has intrigued us since people began organizing, must be examined for its relational aspects.
- Organizational vision and values act like fields, unseen but real forces that influence people’s behavior.
- We now speak in earnest of more fluid, organic structures, of boundaryless and seamless organizations.
- We can forgo the despair created by such common organizational events as change, chaos, information overload, and entrenched behaviors if we recognize that

organizations are living systems, possessing the same capacity to adapt and grow that is common to all life.

- If one has a new way of thinking, why not apply it wherever one's thoughts lead? These new ways of thinking are often very illuminating and capable of leading to newer and deeper insights.

This approach to leadership theory refuses to delineate definite conclusions, case studies, or exemplary practices. Rather, it strongly asserts that every organization has a different and unique reality. We must look internally in our organizations to affect change and bring about improvement. As Wheatley (2006) says, "There are no recipes or formulas, no checklists or expert advice that describes reality. If context is as crucial as the science explains, then nothing really transfers; everything is always new and different and unique to each of us" (p. 9). This view is one with which I agree, and it is one reason why I opted to use the qualitative method of phenomenology in this exploratory study.

### **Developing Effective Leadership**

In a qualitative focus group study by Lorraine Slater (2008) entitled *Pathways to Building Leadership Capacity*, the focus is on describing how school leaders use communication strategies and skills in order to "foster the empowerment" of other members of the organization by using collaborative techniques. Her basic premise is that it is the true role of a leader to "build human capacity and self-knowledge in order to develop human potential" (p. 55). In so doing, the leader of the organization is not seen as a hero, but rather as a "hero-maker." I find this approach and method of explanation particularly poignant. We often place so much emphasis on the importance of having a charismatic or heroic leader. On the other hand, and I would agree completely, a truly great and effective leader is able to

bring out the best in those around him or her. This article strongly asserts this point. As the results of this exploratory study suggest, effective leaders in organizations are skilled in developing *people*, not just policies, processes, and procedures.

Slater (2008) asserts that “creating an environment or culture that unleashes the creativity and energy of people, that supports their natural desire to make a contribution, and that motivates them to want to contribute is a challenge for leaders today” (p. 56). In her study, Slater (2008) conducts eight focus group interviews with a wide range of participants, including parents, teachers, and administrators. The fundamental question in the study is asking the various participants to identify how a leader can support collaboration in the organization. The findings indicate that this goal can be achieved by using certain simple, yet effective, communication techniques and strategies, along with an increased awareness and reliance on one’s emotional intelligence.

In order to build this capacity, the author suggests that it will “involve tapping into the reservoir of underutilized talent within an organization and thereby providing others with the opportunity to shine, to share their talent and to contribute to the work of the school” (Slater, 2008, p. 58). In so doing, the leader can help improve morale, job satisfaction, motivation, and student success. When people’s creativity is unleashed, wonderful things will happen. It can become like a snowball, growing and gaining momentum as it moves along. In addition, by helping people to increase their motivation, self-worth, and passion for work, their higher-order needs, such as self-actualization, can be met. This in turn can only lead to increased and improved performance and an improved organization overall.

Ultimately, in order to help others become self-directed leaders, leadership needs to use effective communication strategies. These strategies, when used effectively by leaders,



will increase collaboration, trust, risk-taking, job satisfaction, morale, performance, and success. As Slater (2008) concludes, “Leaders’ success then will be measured not by the number of followers they have, but rather by the number of individuals that they have inspired to become leaders themselves” (p. 67). The data from this study supports the findings described by Slater but also includes additional strategies for leaders such as a positive worldview, embracing change, global thinking, managerial courage, and reflection.

In *Redesigning Collegiate Leadership: Teams and Teamwork in Higher Education*, Bensimon and Neumann (1993) twice visited fifteen higher education institutions throughout the United States. They conducted personal interviews with the presidents of each institution, along with up to four members of the leadership teams – a total of seventy interviews. The primary questions in the interviews dealt with finding out about the leadership teams’ organization, functions and internal dynamics. As they describe it, “The intent of the study was to explore models of teamwork in higher education, taking into account the leadership orientations of presidents and their executive officers” (p. 11). Their research thesis suggests that leadership is a shared, interactive, and culturally framed activity.

Bensimon and Neumann (1993) provide an excellent and well-rounded literature review on collaboration and teams, making sure to clearly define the terms they use. Ultimately, they conclude that not every team is truly collaborative; rather, it depends very much on the leadership’s orientation to set the proper tone. If this does not occur, the “team” is an illusion and business goes on as usual, with commands and directives coming down from the leader. In order to build truly collaborative teams, the study concludes that what is required is the ability to conduct “difficult dialogue,” or the ability for the team to think, reflect, critique, and rethink *together*. But, how does a leader build such a team?

The authors recommend specific leadership capabilities that are necessary in order to build true teams. First, the ability to understand the subjective experiences of particular others. If colleges and universities are to be “communities of difference,” it is imperative that administrative leaders hear and make every effort to comprehend the voices of others. Secondly, the ability to share and interact. Organizing for real teamwork requires dialogue. To turn a loosely gathered group of people into a real team there must be opportunity for dialogue. In dialogue that is meaningful, “domination is absent, reciprocity and cooperation are prominent” (Belenky, 1986, p. 446). Third is the ability to be critical. Difficult dialogues are accomplished by teams that think and act from critical consciousness (Freire, 1984). Such teams are concerned with more than mere organizational function; they are concerned with what the larger organization stands for and what they enact purposely or inadvertently, openly or in silence. Finally, the ability to reflect and to learn through reflection. Managers learn by reflecting on their actions. “By reflecting upon action, individuals and communities acquire knowledge, skills, and concepts that empower them to remake, and if necessary reorder, the world in which they live” (Schon, 1983, p. 196).

These major recommendations appear to be consistent not only with the other literature on this topic, but also with my own personal experience and the results of this exploratory study. Of particular note, the results of this study suggest the importance of collaboration, developing others, reflection, transparency and inclusivity when it comes to fostering teamwork. Once again, we find that a leader’s “soft skills” or emotional intelligence is absolutely critical in creating an organizational culture that is positive, collaborative, passionate and effective.

Bisbee (2007), in *Looking for Leaders: Current Practices in Leadership Identification in Higher Education*, looks at the issue of leadership in a critical manner. The author states that various problems, including rising costs and a perceived lack of accountability and effectiveness by taxpayers and government, have caused the issue of leadership to come to the forefront today. She suggests that leaders in higher education need to be identified earlier in their careers and nurtured as they grow. In this way, the college leaders of the future will be better equipped to face the wide array of challenges they will inevitably face. The study was conducted in 2004, and “discusses how mid-level academic leaders are identified in land grant universities, what position they held when they were identified, whether they were internal or external candidates for their position, and how they were selected as potential leaders” (Bisbee, 2007, p. 77). Once again, as noted in other studies, the author indicates that there was limited research available on the topic.

Bisbee (2007) presents an interesting literature review where she demonstrates that a new view of leadership can be attributed to the changing structures in organizations across the board. This new view includes key concepts such as increased collaboration, great focus on performance, a more diverse work force, the wealth of information available thanks to technological advances, flatter organizational structures, and decreased institutional loyalty among employees. At the center of this conversation is the discussion involving higher education leaders and the role they play in the organizations where they work. She found that only about half of the Deans today followed the traditional career path from faculty member, to Department Chair, to Associate Dean. The career ladders of administrative academic leaders now have many entry points, making the early identification and training of leaders more complex and challenging (Twombly, 1990). In the final analysis, the study

focuses on the critical need for organizations to do a better job in the *early* identification and training of future leaders.

The recommendations given by the author at the end of her study include internal leadership development programs, the rotating of leadership posts in order to build skills, formal mentoring programs, and the fostering of an organizational culture that values and rewards effective leadership. In my opinion, every one of these recommendations makes sense and can only help in the early identification, training and support of future leaders. Of particular interest to this study is the last recommendation, suggesting the need for a “cultural shift” in organizations. While this prescription sounds simple enough, it is the most complex of tasks to operationalize. How does one affect a cultural shift in any organization, higher education or not? This is another question that this exploratory study has helped to answer, particularly in terms of the importance of developing others, unified leadership, inclusivity, and empowerment.

### **Moving Toward a Culture of Change**

Organizational culture will serve as the fertile soil in which we will be able to plant, cultivate, and grow a learning organization. It must be a culture that encourages a positive learning environment and risk taking. If this type of culture is established in the organization, the most basic form of learning will then have the opportunity to begin, grow, and flourish. Individual learning and the embedding of new knowledge will take place if the leadership of the organization has, indeed, fostered a positive corporate culture where the members of the organization feel a sense of psychological safety. They must have the sense that it is not only “safe” to learn, share, and even make mistakes in the ongoing learning process, but that this process (filled with risks) is strongly encouraged and rewarded. This

concept is supported by the results of this study, which pointed to the importance of a safe and caring work environment in organizations.

The importance of culture in organizational learning is strongly connected to the role of power and politics in the process of becoming a learning organization. As described in *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, by Bolman & Deal (2003), what is needed in order for an organization to be effective are *effective leaders* who are “benevolent politicians” (p. 204). This characterization, though complex and wide reaching, would include such key skills as the ability to set a positive agenda, map the political terrain, effectively use negotiation and bargaining skills, and build influential networks and coalitions. Each of these required capabilities can and will have a major impact on the ability of an organization to learn, grow, and embrace change.

At the same time, however, I find it even more enlightening to consider the concept that politics are not always *negative* forces in an organization. On the contrary, as pointed out in the article *Peter Senge and the Learning Organization* (2003):

Within it (Senge’s work) there seems, at times, to be a dislike of politics and a tendency to see danger in plurality and difference. Here there is a tension between the concern for dialogue and the interest in building a shared vision. An alternative reading is that difference is good for democratic life (and organizational life) provided that we cultivate a sense of reciprocity, and ways of working that encourage deliberation. (p. 14)

Therefore, the common mantra that office politics are bad may not necessarily be true. As this exploratory study helped to reveal, organizational politics may, in fact, help an organization to learn through shared and diverse ideas, differing perspectives, varied mental

models, unique learning styles, and ongoing debate, discussion and dialogue. At the same time, as certain of the participants also suggested, organizations must be on guard against the negative impact of cliques, alliances and favoritism.

Leaders who are willing and able to engage in difficult dialogue can keep everything in balance in an organization. We have seen the importance of engaging in healthy dialogue within an organization in order for organizational learning to occur. When individuals are encouraged to share learned ideas, perspectives, and revelations with one another, then the organization can begin the process of embedding that shared individual knowledge into its corporate knowledge, thereby moving closer to becoming a learning organization.

As summarized by Watkins & Mohr (2001), in *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*:

Thus, an alternative theory of organizational intervention would suggest that a fundamental pre-condition for all organizational change work – whether focused on process innovation, stakeholder relationships, business strategy, organizational culture, diversity, the capability to adapt and improve, or team effectiveness – is to shift the flow of “issue framing dialogues” in the direction of health rather than pathology in order to shift the flow of dialogue from an analysis of malfunction to a holistic understanding of moments of optimal performance. The choice to focus on moments of optimal performance and our conscious use of inquiry are powerful interventions in and of themselves. (p. 33)

Therefore, the organization needs to look at moments when it performed at an exceptional level and when the members of the organization were at their peaks in terms of job performance, camaraderie, and overall job satisfaction. It is in those optimal periods that one

will find the answers as to what worked well and what did not. The goal is to replicate those optimal moments, rather than focus on failure, poor performance, and employee dissatisfaction.

Included in this process are the practices of using rewards and compensation in order to increase worker motivation, as well as the use of mentors and coaches in order to develop good leaders in the organizational framework. Once the organization has progressed through its learning cycle, it will then be ripe for evaluation. At this point, we will be in a better position to determine what the fruits of our labors have been. We can ascertain what worked well, and what did not. In so doing, we can make the necessary corrections to the system and continue in the unending cycle. Through good leadership, a culture that encourages learning, reflection and dialogue, shared learning, and appreciative inquiry and evaluation, the organization can move closer and closer toward practicing organizational learning and, ideally, *becoming* a learning organization. However, just like time, the process is unending. We must learn from the past, work diligently in the present, and plan for a better future. Only then will we awake on that bright new day when learning organizations are the norm rather than the exception.

Throughout this iterative process of individual learning and dialogue with others, it is essential that members of the organization pause and reflect on what it is that is being learned. As such, ongoing reflection is necessary in order for the employees and leaders to process, interpret and absorb information. In this way, the learning can become *embedded* not only in the minds of the individual learners but also in groups and teams. In this manner, the organization itself *learns*. Through shared learning in groups, teams and communities of practice, the organization can progress in a multitude of cycles of single loop, double loop

and deuterio learning. Ultimately, when the organization can adapt its theory in use to errors it encounters in everyday operations, realign its espoused theory through double loop learning, and even reflect on its *own* learning process in deuterio learning, we could begin to make the assertion that the organization is becoming a learning organization capable of successfully dealing with change and apparent chaos. The data from this exploratory study support this concept, particularly in relation to the view that organizations are open systems continually subject to change and rebirth. Periods of change and apparent chaos present unique opportunities for transformational learning and creative realignment in organizations.

Deal & Peterson (1999) suggest that the primary focus of leaders must be on creating a positive, empowering, and encouraging “culture.” For too long, leadership has focused on issues such as power, authority, policy, procedures, and ambiguous theoretical constructs in order to “run” organizations. Our leaders are trained and well-schooled in these important, but not ultimately critical, areas of focus. In the meantime, unfortunately, we have lost sight of the central and most critical ingredient in a successful organization: *the culture*. This idea, and its implications for the present-day operation of organizations of all types and size, has marvelous possibilities.

In their study, Deal & Peterson (1999) suggest that we must seriously consider and strive to build school cultures that will be conducive to the growth, well-being, and student-centeredness of the organization. This is no easy task, as the concept of culture encompasses an enormous area; really, it is the heart and soul, the identity, of the organization:

For decades the terms *climate* and *ethos* have been used to try to capture this powerful, pervasive, and notoriously elusive force. We believe the term *culture* provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better



understand their school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people, act, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their students. (p. 2)

This discussion regarding the discovery, creation and/or re-creation of school culture is fascinating. The authors provide many examples of schools that had no defined culture, or had striven for years to stomp the culture out. These schools had to start from scratch in order to secure buy-in and participation from the students, staff, and community. Other schools were shown that had created and sustained wonderfully powerful and positive organizational cultures, such as a Native American school in Arizona, where even the architecture was a testament to the cultural values of the school. Finally, some examples were given where the culture has turned very negative and various "toxic agents" had taken over. These real-life examples gave flesh to the concepts and vividly illustrated the application of their theoretical framework.

Deal & Peterson (1999) focus on the critical role of leadership in schools. In a refreshingly easy to understand manner, the various significant roles of leadership are informative, thought-provoking, and worth listing here as follows:

- Historian: seeks to understand the social and normative past of the school.
- Anthropological sleuth: analyzes and probes for the current set of norms, values, and beliefs that define the current culture.
- Visionary: works with other leaders and the community to define a deeply value-focused picture of the future for the school; has a constantly evolving vision.
- Symbol: affirms values through dress, behavior, attention, routines.

- Potter: shapes and is shaped by the school's heroes, rituals, traditions, ceremonies, symbols; brings in staff who share core values.
- Poet: uses language to reinforce values and sustains the school's best image of itself.
- Actor: improvises in the school's inevitable dramas, comedies, and tragedies.
- Healer: oversees transitions and change in the life of the school; heals the wounds of conflict and loss.

These eight leadership roles, in my opinion, really get to the heart of establishing a positive, transformational, and mission-centered organizational culture. Additionally, of particular interest is the subtle political implication involved in these roles specifically, and the development of organizational culture overall. As discussed above in Complex Adaptive Systems Theory, the real work happens behind the scenes and is dependent to a large degree on the personal qualities, agendas, and relationships of those who are not only leaders but actors in the system.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methods**

#### **Research Questions**

I have successfully conducted an exploratory research study on the following question: *What role does leadership in organizations play in successfully pushing an organization to the edge (embracing chaos or disequilibrium) in order to affect positive change and/or transformation?* In relation to this overall question, I also worked with the participants in considering the following sub-questions:

1. What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide the organization through periods of change?
2. What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences?
3. How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret those experiences?

#### **Methodological Design**

In order to conduct this exploratory research study on these questions, I carefully considered which method and methodology to utilize in my work. It was an easy and quick decision for me to choose a qualitative method, as opposed to the quantitative. The main reason for this is that I was keenly interested in arriving at a rich, thick, descriptive interpretation of the lived experiences that the participants in relation to the research questions. As such, a quantitative method would simply not have allowed me to develop such a holistic interpretation of the experience of the role that leaders play in organizations that are undergoing periods of change and disequilibrium. That question answered, I settled upon my methodology.

According to Bogdan & Taylor (1975), methodology is comprised of the procedures, principles, and processes incorporated in the approach to a specific research problem and in the search for answers to the research questions. My dilemma was to determine whether I wanted to provide prescriptive advice as a result of the study, or if I was mainly interested in presenting a universal interpretation of the experience. Would I use the grounded theory approach or phenomenology? For this particular problem and research questions, a phenomenological methodology proved to be the most appropriate and effective approach. In phenomenology, the goal of the researcher is to arrive at a holistic and universal explanation of the events, experiences, and perceptions of the participants and co-researchers in the study. Arriving at such a holistic and universal explanation of the experience is precisely what my passion for the issue is striving to achieve.

According to Creswell (2007), “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). As Lauer (1967) suggests, phenomenology refers to knowledge in terms of how it appears to our consciousness. Phenomenology, then, is the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experiences. In fact, phenomenology would argue that there is only one source of certainty that exists: what I think, feel, sense and perceive. The goal of the researcher and participants is to arrive at a general explanation of the common, but unique lived experiences of the participants. My goal was to create not only individual descriptions of the experiences of myself and the participants, but to develop a composite, experience-based universal explanation and description of the group. In turn, this goal leads me to another decision point as I prepared to conduct this research study: Would I employ descriptive phenomenology or interpretive phenomenology?

Rooted in Husserl (1967), descriptive phenomenology requires the researcher to suspend his or her prior knowledge and experience with the topic in order to truly understand the lived experiences of the participants. The researcher should embark upon the study without any preconceived notions regarding the outcomes of the study. In fact, Lopez & Willis (2004) suggest that no literature review or research questions be created, and that the researcher simply describe the experiences of the participants. Additionally, the researcher is expected to “bracket” prior knowledge and experiences, which theoretically will allow the researcher to remain objective. The goal in descriptive phenomenology is to arrive at an unbiased, true description of the phenomenon which can be generalized to the common lived experiences of others. Husserl (1970) called these common lived experiences “universal essences.” These pure, unbiased descriptions do not consider the roles of culture, politics, society, or other external forces. This is a particularly serious drawback for this study, which specifically asks about the role of culture, power and politics in the lived experiences of the participants.

Considering the requirements of descriptive phenomenology outlined above and for the purposes of this study, I utilized an interpretive phenomenological approach. This required that I create a detailed description of the lived experiences of the participants and allowed me to decipher what that description *implied* about those experiences. The implications of those lived experiences may not, perhaps, have even been apparent to the participants themselves. Additionally, this approach has involved an analysis of the cultural, social, and political forces at work throughout those lived experiences. My purpose was not only to describe the lived experiences of the participants in the study (radical autonomy), but

to also explain and interpret what those experiences might imply (situated freedom) about those experiences.

In addressing the question of bracketing, many would suggest that there are two options for the researcher. First, as championed by Husserl (1967), the position that requires the researcher to suspend her own lived experiences and pre-conceived notions. Second, as argued by Heidegger (1977), the assertion that bracketing is not useful or even possible when conducting research. Heidegger (1977) suggested that one cannot separate consciousness from “being in the world” – it is not possible to experience something if it is not in relation to something else. LeVasseur (2003), however, suggests that there is a third option for phenomenological research. The researcher doesn’t suspend his or her experiences and prior knowledge completely and totally; rather, he or she can strive to cultivate a “persistent curiosity” regarding the experience. Therefore, in this study I drew upon my own vivid memories and feelings of the experience while at the same time remaining open to new possibilities, explanations, and interpretations not before considered. My goal was to look at the research with fresh eyes whenever possible.

In summary, then, I have conducted this exploratory research study in the following three key phases and processes:

1. The Epoche – Through critical reflection and a review of a variety of written accounts (personal journals, emails, memos, correspondence), I drew upon my own lived experiences and prior knowledge, as well those of the participants, regarding the research questions, but strove to continually revisit the phenomena with a set of fresh eyes open to new possibilities.

2. Phenomenological Reduction – the experience of each participant has been described in its totality, with its essential variations in perceptions, thoughts, feelings, etc.
3. Imaginative Variation – from the many unique cognitions, perceptions and experiences, the study has arrived at a unified synthesis of universal essences of the experience.

### **Selection of Participants**

In regard to the more essential considerations for the participants in this study, I have assured that each participant met the following criteria:

- The participant has experienced significant change and/or turmoil in their organization and possessed a vivid memory of the details surrounding that experience
- The participant held a Manager or Director level position and was perceived as an effective and successful leader by colleagues and superiors
- The participant is intensely interested in understanding the nature and meaning of that change and how leadership helped or hindered the process
- The participant was willing to take part in a lengthy interview and potential follow-up conversations in order to describe their experience
- The participant would allow me to audio record the interviews
- The participant would allow me to publish the data in my dissertation or other potential publications

I selected six participants to participate in this study, using a combination critical case/snowball typology. Some general considerations that one must keep in mind are usually items such as age, race, ethnic background, culture, gender, political affiliation and socioeconomic status. To that end, the participants in this study break down as follows:

- Three males / three females
- One Latino / four Whites / one African American
- All are United States citizens
- Three politically liberal / three politically conservative
- All hold leadership roles in organizations and are higher income status

### **Description of the Participants**

**Sarah.** Sarah, a 48-year old Anglo-American woman, worked as a District and Division Manager for a large consulting firm in a large Western state for over 10 years. The company served most of the state, as well as business requests from smaller, neighboring states. The founding owners of the organization had built the company quite literally from their home into a large company with offices all over the state. The primary business for the organization was the provision of vocational rehabilitation services for injured workers. Workers' Compensation Insurance paid for the benefits of the injured workers as well as the services that the company provided. For many years, the organization grew and flourished. Incomes were high, marketing was paying off, caseloads were full, and times were good.

Quite unexpectedly, the political landscape of the state changed and a new governor was put in office. Within weeks, in order to address growing budget deficits, the newly installed governor completely overhauled the state's workers' compensation system, virtually eliminating vocational rehabilitation benefits in favor of less expensive one-time cash payments to the injured workers. The company had months to brace itself for the coming changes. The seemingly unending number of referrals would soon slow to a trickle. Panic and doomsday scenarios swirled throughout the organization.



Sarah displayed leadership in the face of this turmoil. She accelerated the roll out of a new and profitable business line that had already been in development. The consultants who had been providing vocational rehabilitation services were methodically and carefully trained and transitioned to become experts in the new business line of conducting ergonomic evaluations and seminars throughout the state in order to *prevent* workplace injuries. The existing marketing network and client base (primarily insurance companies anxious to prevent workplace injuries) were rapidly transitioned to focus on the new service. Through her ability to adapt to change, build new relationships and strengthen old ones, foster a culture of hope and promise, Sarah helped to lead the organization through this period of turmoil.

**David.** David, a 41 year-old Anglo-American man, works as a Clinical Manager for a regional medical center. He also serves as a leading board member for the professional association in his area of expertise. This association is very well known and respected throughout the medical community. Due to their large membership size and well-organized structure, they also exert significant lobbying influence and power in Washington D.C. David has served in a variety of leadership roles in this professional association for over 10 years. He does hold a doctorate in Education in addition to his clinical certifications and licenses.

The association underwent a period of significant turmoil when a certain segment of the membership made a concerted effort to marginalize or eliminate literally thousands of other members. This move was precipitated by the more educationally advanced members of the association who wanted to increase their lobbying power. It was particularly important in the face of uncertainty in the national political arena with regard to the future of healthcare.

These doctoral level members advocated the separation of the association, leaving out lesser degreed individuals. In essence, the membership would be purged of all non-doctoral members. The argument was that the association would be viewed as more credible to outside parties if only doctorate level professionals made up the membership.

David was a leader on one of the three boards in the association at that time. He and the other boards came together to discuss and address the uproar and conflict that resulted from this move by the doctoral level membership and their board. He was a key participant and catalyst in the challenging process of working through the turmoil brought upon the organization. With an unyielding focus on the “big picture” and desire to be inclusive of all members of the organization, David played a crucial role in helping the three boards come to an agreement not to divide the organizational membership in the end. Rather, in their next national campaign, they reaffirmed their desire to be a professional association that is inclusive of all members of the profession, regardless of their educational status. Since then, they have grown in membership and political influence.

**Steve.** Steve, an Anglo-American gentleman of 67, has also served in education for most of his life. He has worked in public education for decades, serving in administration for most of that time. In 2004, after “retiring” from public education, he came to work as the Dean of a small for-profit college. When he took over as Dean, things couldn’t be better. Enrollment was high, morale was good, and most felt secure in their jobs. Steve appeared to be a temporary “place holder” as the organization seemed to be coasting nicely on auto-pilot.

As always, however, nothing stays the same. A variety of events began to impact the organization simultaneously, ranging from dropping enrollments due to the slowing economy, a new CEO determined to cut costs and positions, new online classes and other

programs rolled out without adequate planning or preparation, declining morale among faculty and staff, rising costs in tuition resulting in unhappy students, and increasingly ineffective performance on the part of his departments chairs. Added to this turmoil was a physical remodel of the building and an impending accreditation audit from the national accrediting body.

Steve displayed exceptional leadership during this period of turmoil. He managed to call upon that inner need to succeed that exists in all people – students and staff alike. He built trusting and collaborative relationships not only in Education, but with other departments such as Recruiting, Registration and Finance. The culture of the organization reflected his positive can-do attitude and behaviors began to change. Steve called upon the best in his staff and the students, and they all rose to meet those high expectations. While there are still difficult times as the economy recovers, the culture of the organization has been changed so that challenges are embraced and overcome. Steve’s leadership was central to this phenomenon.

**Diego.** Diego, a 58 year-old Latino, served as Director of a private treatment center for troubled members of the clergy. Himself a clergyman, he led an organization made up of a variety of individuals from all walks of life. The organization was suddenly and publically thrust into the local and national media when one of their patients appeared in newscasts all over the country. While the organization did eventually close, Diego led it successfully through this particular period of turmoil. Today, he runs a private practice as the organization in question closed its doors not long after the episode described in the interview process for this study.

The private treatment center was accustomed to operating behind closed doors with little to no outside influence or access. That all ended abruptly when the local and national media literally showed up on their doorstep after a former patient made the national news. Diego was called upon as the Director to manage the public spectacle as well as hold his team together through the difficult ordeal. His staff and the residents of the facility fell into a state of intense panic and fear, better described by him as an “emotional frenzy.” The corporate office, on the other hand, seemed to slip into a state of denial about the situation and became increasingly reluctant to get involved.

As a result, Diego was basically on his own in leading the organization during this period. Quick to respond, he positioned himself as the highly visible and accessible leadership representative internally and for the benefit of the press externally. He opened the doors to the press and made every effort to model transparency, while still protecting the privacy of the staff and residents. Diego successfully led the organization through this period of upheaval through constant attention to the emotional well-being of his staff, personal engagement both internally and externally, and careful planning for all potential scenarios. Central to this success was an ongoing personal reflection as events unfolded.

**Miranda.** Miranda, a 41-year old African-American lady, worked her way up the corporate ladder in a lucrative and rapidly expanding consulting firm. She began her career with the organization at a young age and quickly became a Senior Consultant and Manager. Business was good and morale was high, not only in the offices that she managed, but throughout the entire company. She was an excellent supervisor who had a particular skill in regard to marketing and growing the client base, as well as hiring and training new employees. Times were good.

With little warning, as is often the case, the business climate for the organization changed. External political and economic forces virtually erased the need for the services provided by the company. While the corporate office struggled to react and move the organization in a new direction, most employees scrambled to get as much out of the dwindling market as possible. The concern over the shrinking number of new clients, however, quickly grew into a very real fear of losing one's job altogether. Many employees opted to leave the organization and minimize their losses.

Miranda exhibited strong leadership skills during this difficult and painful time in her organization. She managed to maintain a positive and hopeful culture in the offices where she worked. With her leadership, colleagues remained calm and were able to face the challenges before them in a reasoned and intelligent way. While the office did in fact eventually close, Miranda was instrumental in leading the organization through this period of turmoil. In fact, she and one of her colleagues joined forces and, capitalizing on the skills they had acquired in the organization, opened a new and vibrant business together.

**Dolores.** Dolores is a 34 year-old Latina and successful organizational development professional working as a Marketing Director in a large healthcare system. She had left the organization for two years in order to work in the Quality & Performance Improvement Department at another regional hospital in the state, but decided to return to her original organization in order to follow her first love of marketing. Although she had learned a great deal in her time away, she was very excited to return as a marketing manager in charge of the health plan. Her former boss was very well-respected in the organization and had actively encouraged Dolores to come back "home."

Shortly after her return, the Marketing Director left the organization and Dolores found herself in charge of the entire department with little direction or assistance. Additionally, the organization was in the process of merging with another healthcare system out-of-state. This merger required Dolores to assume the management role over two teams: the new team from the merger company and her own local team. Many of the team members had formally been peers, and now answered to Dolores. Due to the difficult economy, the Director position was not filled. This rapid change of events left Dolores on her own to lead a demoralized and fearful department.

Despite the turmoil that she inherited, Dolores was determined to “grow up quickly” and address the turmoil head on. She relied upon her educational and professional experience to initiate a decisive plan of action. She viewed the situation as an opportunity to begin with a clean slate and make the various changes that she had always felt were needed. She collaborated with other leaders in the organization, as well as the merger company, to chart a new course and combine the resources and energies of the two teams. She also found a new and important resource in the person of a Vice-President from the merger organization. Today, the organization is moving forward and adapting to the changing circumstances in the turbulent economic environment. Through her effective leadership, Dolores helped to shape this new and improved organizational culture.

### **Researcher Perspective**

Given my own previous life experiences and philosophical beliefs, I do have personal opinions and feelings that have affected my research on how leadership can successfully help organizations survive in turbulent times. I have experience with leaders and organizations that have both flourished in difficult times as well as those who have failed miserably. I feel

that valuable insights have been gleaned from both. I have recognized issues of differing worldviews, as well as my own personal relationship with each of the participants. These personal biases may have influenced the interpretation of the data collected. However, because of the variety of professional experiences and educational expertise that I bring to this study, I have endeavored to remain acutely aware of those experiences that are new to me and always remained intensely curious when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. This previous knowledge and experience has provided me with insight to ask probing or follow-up questions in order to develop a rich and accurate description of the universal experiences of the participants. My openness to acknowledge these potential biases and to continuously question myself throughout the research process has helped to ensure a fair and honest collection and presentation of the data.

### **Literature Review**

After ensuring that the participants in my study had met the criteria for selection detailed above, I then utilized the literature review methods discussed below as suggested by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007).

First, I carefully reviewed the research questions to ensure that they are rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance. Several iterations of the research questions were developed, considered and revised in preparation for the study in order to ensure that each question is stated in clear and concrete terms. The research questions contained in this study grew out of an intense interest and curiosity originating in my own personal experience and history, as well as an acknowledgement of the need for further research in the field of leadership development and change management. These driving forces are at the core of this study and continually

inspired and excited my journey as a researcher. Ultimately, the goal of the research questions in this study was to arrive at a rich description of the lived experiences of the participants.

In preparation for the study, I conducted a comprehensive review of the professional and research literature in order to assess prior studies, their design, methodologies and findings in relation to the central research questions of this study. Of the four types of literature reviews outlined by Cooper (1989), which include integrative, theoretical, methodological, and thematic, I utilized a thematic approach, as my intense curiosity was precisely that – to arrive at a composite description of the themes or universal essences from the lived experiences of the participants. As such, in my review of the professional literature, I attempted to present and discuss specific themes arising out of previous similar studies and briefly discuss how the results of that research are related to my own study.

Additionally, in Chapter Five I have included an enhanced review and discussion of the professional literature that builds upon the themes discussed in Chapter Two and incorporates a variety of new and/or unique concepts more directly related to the specific results that emerged from the results of this study. Included in that expanded discussion is an increased focus on the literature around complexity theory, creative chaos, critical reflection, staff development, humility, managerial courage, and leadership as influence.

The sources I utilized in conducting the literature review included those most frequently used as outlined by Cooper (1989, p. 59): references in review papers written by others, references in books written by others, communication with people who typically share information with the researcher, references in non-review papers from journals, and computer searches of abstract databases.



## **Confidentiality and Ethical Concerns**

Regarding the adherence to the ethical principles of research, I have ensured that any and all agreements with the participants are clear and understood by all. Confidentiality has been maintained so that no personal, organizational or geographical identifiers appear in the presentation of data and/or its composites, and informed consent has been secured from all participants. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, as well as names of organizations, cities and states. Only the *type* of organization has been referenced, such as high school, college, hospital, consulting firm, etc. I have provided a full disclosure to each participant as to the nature, purpose, and requirements of the research and informed each participant of his/her right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, the design and process of data collection has been completely open for discussion with any and all participants.

## **Interviews**

Kvale (1996) explains the literal meaning of an interview as an exchange of persons' views on a similar topic. The interviews conducted in this exploratory study provided a rich description of the lived experiences of the participants from a social constructivism perspective. Through my experience of listening to the perspectives of the participants in their own words, I was able to develop insights on their interpretation of their experiences as leaders helping an organization to succeed in turbulent times.

After carefully reviewing the consent forms with each participant and answering any questions, I interviewed the six participants over a ten-month period. The individual interviews were audio recorded, with lengths of between 21 and 39 minutes. Those recordings were then transcribed and reviewed twice to ensure consistency. Each of the six

completed transcriptions, totaling 60 pages, was analyzed in order to better understand any recurring themes that may exist and explain how leaders can help organizations to navigate and survive during periods of significant change. Six participants (two from healthcare, two from education, and two from private, for-profit industry) were interviewed. All participants were asked to describe the circumstances and experiences they had encountered in their role as leaders during periods of organizational change. The participants were equally divided between male and female, range in ages from 34 to 67, and included Anglo, Hispanic, and African-American backgrounds. All are high-income wage earners, hold graduate degrees, and continue to function in leadership positions today.

The interview questions that have been designed and presented in the personal interviews with the participants must also meet a certain standard. They grew out of an intense interest in the problem or topic being studied. My own excitement and curiosity has inspired this exploratory research study, and I have never forgotten that only personal history and experience can bring the core of the problem into focus. As such, the questions formulated for the interviewing process have met the following criteria:

- They seek to reveal the “essences” and meaning of the human experiences of the participants.
- They seek to uncover the qualitative factors in those behaviors and experiences.
- They engage the total self of the participant and sustain personal and passionate involvement in the study
- They do not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships
- They can be interpreted with careful, accurate and vivid descriptions – not measurement, ratings or scores.

The interview questions were structured to address the research questions, but additional topics have also emerged through the process of analyzing the responses and descriptions provided by the participants throughout the course of the exploratory study.

### **Interview Protocol**

1. Can you please describe what happened in the organization that caused the change and chaos you had to deal with?
  - Probe 1. What was your reaction to these events?
  - Probe 2. How do you view change or uncertainty generally?
2. How did you, as a leader, try to deal with these events and circumstances?
  - Probe 1. How would you describe your leadership style?
  - Probe 2. What decisions did you need to make in order to deal with the circumstances in the organization?
  - Probe 3. How did you address the concerns and fears of others?
3. How did others in the organization react?
  - Probe 1. How did office politics affect peoples' behavior?
  - Probe 2. What role did power relationships play in decisions, behaviors or reactions to events?
  - Probe 3. How would you describe the organizational culture?
4. How did this experience affect you?
  - Probe 1. What lessons did you learn?
  - Probe 2. How has your worldview changed as a result?
  - Probe 3. What would you do differently?
5. What is the current status of the organization?
6. Looking back, is there a common theme, idea, or approach that can explain how you made it through this difficult experience?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding this experience?

**Figure 3.1: Interview protocol for participants in exploratory research study**

## **Data Analysis**

After conducting the in-person interviews with all participants, the recordings were transcribed. I then twice verified the consistency of the written transcripts with the original digital recordings. I analyzed each individual interview transcript from the six participants using an interpretive phenomenological approach. A set of common themes emerged from the data after a series of readings and comparisons of the responses to the original interview questions. After sending the transcripts and preliminary individual thematic analyses to the participants for member-checking purposes, I conducted an analysis of the themes from the interview transcriptions in light of the major research questions of this exploratory study for each individual participant.

Each individual transcript was then emailed to each participant. I then confirmed via email response that the participant was in agreement with the content of the transcript. No corrections or changes were noted. I proceeded to create individual textural-structural descriptions of the experiences of each participant. Common themes or meaning units were clustered together in a separate document in order to organize the results of my interpretation of the individual lived experiences of each of the participants. Those separate documents were then emailed to each participant for review. Follow up emails, phone calls, and in-person conversations were conducted over the course of one month with each participant in order to ensure that I had captured the essence of each participant's individual lived experience.

From those individual themes and experiences, I conducted a composite review in order to uncover any common themes and/or significant differences in the experiences of the participants overall. These themes were compared with the current literature on leadership,

organizational learning, complex adaptive systems theory, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems theory as outlined in Chapter Two and further discussed in Chapter Five. By using an interpretive phenomenological approach for the analysis of the interview transcripts detailed below, my interpretation of the universal essence of the experiences of the participants emerged from the data and is presented in Chapter Four.

Once I obtained a full description of the phenomena, I utilized the data analysis process described by Moustakas (1994), which is a variation of Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975). The specific data analysis process I followed in this study is outlined as follows:

1. Carefully consider each statement's significance with respect to the experience.
2. Record all relevant statements in a separate document.
3. List each repetitive, non-overlapping statement (meaning units).
4. Relate and cluster those meaning units into themes.
5. Synthesize the meaning units and themes into a description of the *textures* of the experience, including verbatim examples from the original text.
6. Reflecting upon the textural description, through imaginative variation construct a description of the *structures* of that experience.
7. Construct a synthesis of the two, or a *textural-structural* description of the meanings, or universal essences, of the experience.
8. Once a textural-structural description of the experience has been constructed for each participant, construct a *composite textural-structural* description, integrating the individual descriptions into a universal description representing the research group as a whole.

As discussed above, I continually communicated with the various participants throughout the construction of each individual description – textural, structural, and textural-structural. The participants have had ample opportunities to examine and edit their own descriptions in order to ensure an accurate representation of each participant’s lived experiences. A transcriptionist was hired in order to accurately transcribe the audio recordings into precise, written electronic transcriptions of each interview. The actual data-analysis process was conducted manually using both electronic and paper documents.

### **Validity and Reliability**

In an effort to validate the data collected during the course of this study, I sent copies of the transcripts from each interview to the participants in that interview. The interviewee was given the opportunity to review and revise the transcripts in order to ensure that he or she was comfortable that the transcript accurately portrayed the lived experiences of the participant. I welcomed the opportunity to review and examine the transcripts, as well as the textural-structural description for each participant. Changes, corrections, additions and deletions continued until the participant was satisfied that their own lived experiences were adequately presented. These conversations took place with each participant over the course of a one-month period via email, telephone, and in-person visits. Additionally, I triangulated data collection through third-party individuals. Triangulation addresses the lens of the researcher by collecting evidence through multiple methods and from multiple sources (Maxwell, 2005). Third-party observations of described events have served to validate the data collected through the initial interview process.

The final check on validity has relied on individuals external to the study, such as members of my dissertation committee and a qualified outside party who has reviewed the

composite analysis. The third-party, independent review of the composite analysis was conducted by a Master's prepared individual with over 20 years' experience as a professional educator and curriculum development specialist both at the state and local level. This process has helped to ensure that the reported results were consistent and further assess their accuracy and credibility.

### **Summary**

Upon completion of the exploratory research study reported here, I have summarized the methods of the study overall and re-considered any possible limitations or issues I may have encountered along the way. I have returned to the literature review repeatedly in order to distinguish the findings of this study from those of prior research. One of the strengths of qualitative research is that it identifies areas of research that have not been previously investigated. The goal of this study was to provide insight into the role that leaders play in helping organizations to succeed in turbulent times. Individual and composite analyses of the interview data, as well as my own lived experience as a leader have provided insight into the interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants presented in this study. Ongoing reflection, curiosity, and investigation have served as driving forces throughout the data collection and analysis phases of this exploratory study. Qualitative analysis was the primary form of data analysis utilized in this study. Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) provided the framework that was followed in order to establish validity in the research presented here. Chapter Four reports the findings for each research question and presents my interpretation of the data collected.

## Chapter IV

### Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to arrive at a clearer understanding of the role that leaders play in helping organizations to succeed in turbulent times. One-on-one interviews were conducted with six participants, each of whom are or have been leaders in organizations that underwent periods of significant change or turmoil. The primary interviews and follow-up conversations were conducted throughout a ten-month period. The findings revealed that each participant's individual experience as a leader during times of organizational change was unique; however, some interesting commonalities and differences emerged within the group. These similarities and differences are reported below and further discussed in Chapter Five.

In this chapter, quotations from the interview transcripts are used to illustrate the findings. All identifying information of participants was changed to ensure confidentiality; pseudonyms were used for any potentially identifying information. All quotations are presented as they were recorded and transcribed.

#### Primary Research Question

The overall research question of this exploratory study asked: *What role does leadership in organizations play in successfully pushing an organization to the edge (embracing chaos or disequilibrium) in order to affect positive change and/or transformation?* In order to delve more deeply into this primary question, I focused on the following three sub-questions which are addressed in greater detail later in this chapter:

1. What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide the organization through periods of change?



2. What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences?
3. How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret those experiences?

The main findings of this study align with the sub-questions, each of which is discussed in this chapter. All six participants in this exploratory study had personally experienced a situation in which they were in a leadership role in an organization as it underwent significant periods of change and turmoil. The experiences of the participants were explained in detail during the in-person interviews, transcript reviews, and follow up conversations. All participants were given ample opportunities to review their interview transcripts for correctness, as well as the individual thematic analysis of each transcript. With some differences, depending on the personal style of each participant, a number of common themes emerged from the analysis of the data. In-person audio recorded interviews, transcript reviews, individual and composite analyses, and a third-party review of the analyses were used to respond to all of the research questions. A composite thematic analysis was used to review the individual themes of the six participants and compile them into an overall, universal essence of the experiences.

**Introduction.** The participants' worldview became the main determinant of their responses to the individual interview questions. All six participants expressed a generally positive worldview, indicating that they expected and embraced change in their organizations as an opportunity to grow and improve. After describing the events that each participant had experienced, they were asked about their personal reactions to those events and, more specifically, how they view change or uncertainty in general. Their responses were truly illuminating and permeated the rest of the interview. What emerged was a clear indication

that what drove and sustained each leader during the organizational upheaval they had endured was in fact their open, accepting, and positive attitude toward change. I will revisit the concept of *embracing change* again in the third sub-question below, as well as in Chapter Five.

**In their own words.** When asked about her view of change or uncertainty, Sarah, a well-respected business consultant, responded without hesitation:

I think as a leader you have to anticipate that change is going to occur, and as far as I'm concerned, I like to see a plan, a well thought out plan in place, for just in case, I guess a backup plan. If you don't have a backup plan, I don't think it's always going to be successful. But you have to know that change is going to come, and you have to not be afraid of change.

She indicated in her interview that one can never be frightened by the prospect of change because it is an inevitability in this world. The key factor for Sarah was not worrying about whether or not change was going to happen and to not fear it. Rather, she stressed that the leader must simply expect that change will happen and be prepared for it through careful planning of all options and scenarios. The emphasis on planning is particularly poignant for Sarah, as the organization she worked in ultimately went out of business, partially due to poor planning on the part of top leaders.

David was similarly upbeat and matter-of-fact when describing his view of change and uncertainty. He replied:

I don't ever look at change as being something negative, and that, I think, is part of my personality. Change is inevitable for any organization, whether it's a national organization or a local mom and pop organization. I think that my personal reflection

on any change is going to be that it's something that's just part of life, and that you just have to go with the flow. I think my perspective is to always look at the much broader, bigger picture being a leader, instead of looking at the details. Try to look at it from a larger perspective.

In the experience that David shared in his interview, the organization was narrowly focused on a relatively minor policy with significant implications. The association had become deadlocked about professional membership criteria, sending the three membership boards into a state of anger, suspicion and apparent chaos. David, on the other hand, helped to successfully broker a settlement by reminding the other leaders and members of the organization of their broader vision – inclusiveness and growth.

In his role as Dean of a private college, Steve found himself suddenly confronted with a myriad of challenges from within and from outside the organization. Economic factors at the national level had combined to form the perfect storm along with a significant change in corporate leadership and organizational priorities for the college, which has over 100 campuses in the United States. Steve never flinched, however, as he responded in his interview:

I never worry about change. I never worry about whether or not we are going to make it. And the primary reason is that I work with this thunderous team and they are just going to make it happen. They all have integrity, they are all smart. We get our heads together and say, 'Okay, now what are we going to do?'

No matter what came his way, Steve maintained a belief that all would work out in the end. This belief was grounded not only in his own innate sense of optimism but also in a sincere faith in the abilities of his team.

For Diego, former Director of a treatment facility for the clergy, the change and turmoil he encountered came abruptly and without warning. After one of the former clients of the facility was arrested, a national media frenzy ensued. Literally over night, the organization was bombarded with media requests for information and interviews. The television crews camped out on their grounds, waiting for someone to step forward and answer their many questions. Diego took the lead and stepped up to the plate. Looking back on his experience, Diego commented:

Generally speaking, uncertainty and change is...I always view it as a challenge, I always invite it. ...in some of the training programs that I've participated in the past, one of comments that has always been made about me is that I speak up and invite change as a way to challenge me. That's the way I associate the two together. So, I see change as an opportunity for growth.

Diego exemplifies the intrinsic sense of optimism and positive view of change that successful leaders must have in order to successfully navigate difficult times in their organizations.

Next, we come to Miranda. The experience she spoke of happened about 15 years ago, when she was still quite a young leader. While the corporation she worked for eventually closed its doors, Miranda held her team of 4 offices together through the turmoil.

When asked about her view of change, she replied:

I think the only way we actually grow as people, as individuals, as corporations, is that change has to take place because otherwise we become stagnant in our practices, we become comfortable in our procedures, and change is necessary in order to take any company to another level. So I am actually very comfortable with change. I keep

a positive attitude about everything that I deal with and try to find what good can come out of any situation. So that's how I personally feel about change.

Miranda indicated that, although she was quite young and initially stunned by the circumstances that confronted her, maintaining a positive attitude and optimistic worldview kept her and her team together. Looking back on this experience, Miranda felt that it was an incredible learning and growth opportunity for her. To this day, as Director of a college, she carries that lesson in her heart. She exhibited a sense of determination and curiosity about the future and what it might hold. Miranda is a leader who frequently says, "Bring it on! Let's see what exciting new adventure awaits us."

Another young leader who participated in this exploratory study is Dolores. Her attitude toward change echoed the others:

Me personally, I embrace change. I understand that it has to happen and I think that for every organization or department to remain fresh, to remain, you know, with fresh new ideas, it's important for change to happen. I mean, if change doesn't happen, things stay stagnate, so I embrace it.

While her attitude toward change is similar to the others in the study, Dolores continues to work for the organization today. Steve is the only other participant still employed with the organization they spoke of in their interviews. Dolores expressed a sincere desire to learn from her experiences as well. In the difficult experience of leading her department through a merger period, she has encountered a variety of very difficult situations. The common theme that consistently arose, however, is her innate belief that change is a positive and necessary part of growth. Today, her organization is viewed as one of the most successful and competitive in its market. The rebranding campaign led by Dolores has been a huge success.

## Leadership Qualities

**Sub-question One.** The first research sub-question asked: What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide an organization through periods of change? In the interviews, each participant was asked a series of questions about the experiences they had gone through, their reaction to those experiences, decisions that were made, and how they helped others to deal with the situation. The interview transcripts were then reviewed to look for key themes found in the responses from each individual participant. Those individual common themes were shared with each participant and discussed to ensure that the essences of the experiences had been captured. The individual analyses for each participant were then reviewed and a composite analysis was created in order to arrive at a close approximation of the universal experience for the overall study group. The composite analysis was then compared to the results of a composite analysis conducted independently by a qualified third-party.

In Figure 4.1, the common leadership qualities that emerged from this study are listed, along with some notable differences and corresponding participant quote. I did not revisit again the overarching theme of *embraces change* below, as it was already discussed at length above as the primary theme that appears to run through every aspect of the study. What follows is a series of illustrative examples from the data addressing each of the remaining common themes identified in the composite analysis.

Common Themes	Significant Differences	Participant Quote
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Embraces Change</li> <li>▪ Collaborative</li> <li>▪ Good Communicator</li> <li>▪ Thinks Globally</li> <li>▪ Develops Others</li> <li>▪ Managerial Courage</li> <li>▪ Reflection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Charismatic</li> <li>▪ Benevolent Dictator</li> </ul>	<p>You have to trust in your own spiritual center, and so I know who I am, I know what I am doing. I know how to work with people, and when people are tearing their hair out, I pull them back to the basics so that they are reminded of what we are really all about.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Steve</p>

**Figure 4.1: What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide an organization through periods of change?**

**Collaborative.** In reviewing the data, a common theme that emerged regarding what qualities leaders must have in order to help organizations to succeed in turbulent times was to be *collaborative*. Every participant in the study touched on this quality throughout the course of their interviews and follow up conversations. One response that stands out in regard to this question came from Dolores. She replied:

Well, when I was asked to take over the department I set up one-on-ones with all my staff which I religiously have every week. I also have a bi-weekly staff meeting, and at the staff meeting I told them, you know, that I was asked to run this department. I've been given this opportunity and I wanted them to know how much I appreciate them and how much I think how well they do not just for me but for being colleagues with them and peers with them, and how excited I was to take on this new challenge and really just let them know that I want to help lead them as best I can. I also want them to feel like they can come to me. I have an open door policy and they can come

to me with any questions or concerns. We have the same vested interest which is marketing the organization.

For Dolores, collaboration is a key to success. She readily acknowledged that the organization cannot be successful only based on the skills or knowledge of any individual, no matter their position, degree, or title. Such success can only come through a concerted collaborative effort on the part of everyone. As the leader, she focused much of her energy and effort on fostering and empowering such collaboration in her department as they went through the stressful period of the merger.

Similarly, David asserted:

Well, my leadership style is always, again, to look at the much broader implications of who it's going to affect. I think one of my personality strengths is to make sure that we always include those who are either underserved or make sure we are including the voices of all those people who are not there, basically being a representative for people who are not there. Collaborative, optimistic, and inclusive.

For David, a slight nuance to the collaborative quality of leaders is to ensure inclusivity.

Both Dolores and David stressed the criticality of being collaborative in one's leadership style, with inclusivity being either explicitly mentioned as a part of that quality or implied as one of the characteristics of collaboration itself.

In other words, collaboration means more than working with others in the organization alone. Collaboration means that leaders work with others inside and outside the system in order to accomplish goals, making sure to include all people in the organization while empowering them to initiate their own ideas and proposals. A good leader collaborates



across the spectrum or encourages others to collaborate in the organization and then trusts those teams to act (Slater, 2008). You can't have one without the other.

**Good communicator.** Another key quality that leaders must possess in order to be successful is to be a *good communicator*. Collaboration requires that the leader demonstrate good communication skills as he or she builds teams or fosters and supports the ongoing collaborative efforts of others in the organization. In Miranda's experience, she recounted:

We enjoyed our work; we enjoyed one another. So when I hear, you know, this type of immediate change that was going to happen it produced all types of emotions for everyone. So a lot of times, like I mentioned before, we would talk as a team in staff meetings, but then it was also as a leader, constantly meeting one-on-one with the different staff persons and addressing their individual concerns and, again, trying to bring out anything positive as possible. During that time we were all still there working, knowing that some people may be looking for other jobs and not sharing that information, but then knowing that still there was still work to do everyday and trying to create that type of positive environment to, you know, continue to be collaborate and be productive, while we were there at work on a daily basis.

While the organization Miranda worked for eventually did close its doors, she frequently stressed the importance of open and clear communication as a key reason why her particular region of the company stayed together to the end and continued to produce. This group of employees, under her leadership, made a slow and thoughtful transition out of the industry.

For Miranda, open and clear communication meant that information flowed freely within the organization. As the leader, she would ensure that every member of her staff had access to the information they needed to successfully complete their job. Since fear can

easily result from not knowing, Miranda made every effort to make information known to her employees. Additionally, Miranda took the time in staff meetings, as well as in one-on-one meetings, to answer any questions members of her staff may have. Explaining and allowing for questions was a key technique for Miranda as she helped her organization to cope with the turmoil that confronted them.

Sarah's organization underwent a significant and sudden change as a result of budget-cutting government legislation, virtually overnight. When asked how she tried to lead in those circumstances, she commented:

I think I just tried to let everybody know what was really happening. There was no sense of hiding. Other Directors weren't approaching it at all with their staff members and just not saying anything at all. And I think when you don't say anything at all, it just makes it worse than it has to be. So, I tried to give people a timeline, I tried to tell people what their alternatives were. I told them to jump on the bandwagon as soon as they could for the new services and to make themselves as marketable as possible. I made sure the lines of communication were wide open.

Sarah, unlike other leaders in the organization who opted *not* to communicate what was happening to the company with their own divisions, recognized the importance of open and honest communication in helping her staff to make it through this difficult time.

Just as was the case with Miranda above, Sarah indicated that knowing is better than not knowing, even if the news isn't good. As Sarah stated above, "I think when you don't say anything at all, it just makes it worse than it has to be." This belief led Sarah to strive for open and honest communication with her staff – good news or bad news. As a result, Sarah's division made the transition in a much smoother fashion and survived longer than other areas

of the company. And, as a positive side effect, her staff members were able to plan and transition to other organizations in a thoughtful and minimally disruptive manner. This made all the difference in the world.

**Thinks globally.** Another prevalent theme that emerged from the data in this exploratory study was a leader's ability and proclivity to *think globally*. This quality incorporates other related values such as strategic thinking, optimism, and recognizing the interrelated nature of the universe overall.

Steve, Dean of a private technical college, expressed this idea in a profound and historically grounded way:

You know, my feeling about what we are going to do is that we are going to establish one world commonwealth, one world religion and so forth. There are going to be mega changes and this is going to happen exponentially over the next 100 years. So, when you look that kind of thing, you just always have to go with the flow. We are doing this thing right now at (name of college). We are creating the schedule. I have five classes that do not have rooms. And we are waiting; we have no room. We have outgrown the school. They are behind on situating us in a new place. They are looking at a thing whether we may stay there and they may remodel it and rebuild it. That will take a year, but in the interim, we have to find space some place ourselves for, you know, this is theory classes, okay. Well, but it hasn't happened yet. We are in the cue for being looked at to say, 'Okay, yes, we are giving you permission to spend the money.' But at this particular point, people are getting really worried because we are three weeks away from the beginning of a new start and we have five classes without rooms! Now, I'm not, I'm not worried about it. People started to say,

‘Well, what’s going to happen?’ My feeling about it is, is that we have never failed and we never will. We will come up with something.

Not only is Steve not worried about the space issue at his organization, but he also demonstrates an innate and passionate belief that it will all work out in the end, because it always does.

This is not to say that Steve doesn’t brainstorm and collaborate with his colleagues to solve the problem, because he certainly did solve the problem. Rather, he expresses a profound certitude that the issue will be solved and that it’s really a small issue in the greater scope of things. With an innate ability and tendency to see the world as an intricately interrelated global system, Steve is better equipped to deal with relatively minor problems. As a global thinker, he can see the plight of his own organization in light of the larger picture. He thinks beyond his department, his college, or even his corporation. Steve frequently says, “You know, 100 years from now, this building won’t even be here anymore.” Interesting reality check, indeed.

Dolores speaks of the importance of thinking globally as well, although with a more strategic or system-oriented perspective. As the Marketing Director for a healthcare system made up of several hospitals, she finds it very important to never lose sight of the bigger, global picture. As she put it, “I am the one who has to keep the system hat on and ask what’s best for the system. Although I wanted to help every CEO reach their monthly goals and their quotas and things like that, ultimately it’s on my shoulders to make sure that it’s cohesive as a system.” Dolores warned that if a leader does not think globally, organizations can become divided and operate in silos. Such divisions can result in scattered goals, duplicated efforts, and an unhealthy competition between the players.

Therefore, even if a leader is *collaborative* and a *good communicator*, the questions that then arise are: Where is that leader leading her organization? What's the goal, the mission, and the vision? Why should anyone follow her? In order to answer these questions, an effective leader must also be a *global thinker*.

**Develops others.** Building on the data presented above regarding what qualities leaders possess as they help guide organizations through periods of change is the ability to *develop others*. Each participant in this study spoke about the value and importance of leaders working to inspire, teach, and nurture their employees. As Miranda says:

So I think, one decision on the business side because we were branching into new territory, was to begin to set up different training, different training sessions, and have people come in to try to talk to us about moving in different directions. So it was just really training the staff how to move into a new direction with the company.

Personally, I think during a time like that you can't help but wonder, if your industry is going to change in a couple of years, what are *you* going to do with your *own* future. I used to always think we spent our everyday helping people decide what they were going to do with the rest of their lives, and I do remember thinking, 'Now I have to apply that to myself and my staff, and what are we going to do with the rest of *our* lives.'

In her situation, Miranda shared the vivid recollection that, as a leader, one of her primary responsibilities was to work with her staff and develop them professionally in order to continue to produce during the transitional period. She encouraged and financially assisted her staff to pursue advanced degrees, attend trainings, workshops and conferences, and sharpen new and emerging skills identified as important for future growth and advancement

in the industry. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, she worked to develop her staff and prepare them for the future, whether that meant becoming skilled and proficient in a new line of services or moving on to other opportunities outside of the company or industry altogether.

While Miranda's organization had some time to plan and respond to the change that they experienced, Diego's situation was quite different. His organization was abruptly thrust into a state of turmoil, fear, and paralysis. As a result of being suddenly inserted into the national media spotlight, Diego recalls how he went about supporting and developing his staff:

I had both the professional and the support staff come up to me, as well as the residents. They were all in an emotional frenzy as I would describe it, regarding seeing news media parked alongside the roadway and film crews outside. Based on that, my response was to begin by having a series of staff meetings in which one by one for each population of those represented, I'd listen to their concerns and their projections of what the scenarios were - they were all negative that they were expressing at the time. Then I had another series of staff meetings in which I then formulated a response based on their particular issues. So that any new information or any new emotional response or a further fantasy expectation that they might have had in the meantime between the first series of staff meetings and the second, then I would listen to those again and then began to meet with the individual populations over a period of time until the organization seemed to be comfortable.

In Diego's situation, he was dealing with a highly educated group of employees whose professional credentials were already quite impressive as licensed clinicians. The

development he focused on with his staff was primarily in the affective domain. In order to make it through the trauma of their situation, Diego methodically and intentionally focused on helping the staff to emotionally and psychologically adapt and grow through the turmoil the organization faced.

How was Diego able to accomplish this task? He took the time to meet at length with each member of his staff, at which time he called upon his skills as a therapist to determine their individual needs. Once he had done that, Diego then met with the entire staff – professional and administrative – in order to identify the group dynamic of his team overall. Not only did he develop an improvement plan for each person individually but he also created and implemented a plan for his entire team collectively. Diego proceeded through several iterations of this process, continually adjusting and refining his approach as the changing circumstances warranted.

After all, what good is a leader who can collaborate, communicate, and think globally, if those who follow her are not up to the challenge? As such, it is vital that effective leaders possess the skills, desire, and willingness to put forth as much energy in developing their staff as they spend on advancing their own professional and personal expertise. To this end, an effective leader is also a teacher, coach, cheerleader, and mentor. Anyone, formal leader or not, who has attempted to fulfill one of these roles will tell you that it is no easy task.

As discussed at length in Chapters Two and Five, the “softer” skills of a leader, such as the ability to develop others, appear to be lacking in most leadership training today. Truly effective leaders must not only be skilled at how to “run” an organization from the structural and policy perspectives but also from the perspective of growing and developing others.

Effective leaders don't create followers in the organizations in which they serve; they create other leaders. Such a task requires the ability to identify and address the various needs of the staff, with the goal of developing and preparing people for advancement. Some leaders may tend to shy away from such an approach due to a concern for self-preservation, which leads us to the next common theme in this study.

**Managerial courage.** An important concept that emerged from the data analysis in this exploratory study was that of *managerial courage*. Every one of the participants touched on this leadership competency during the course of their interviews and follow up conversations in one way or another. Some participants stressed the importance of exercising managerial courage in pushing an organization to succeed, while others spoke of the damage that can be done when leaders fail to show courage in the face of challenges. On the effective and positive side, Steve shared the following enlightening example:

Every week we go over the numbers, we look at students' gross drop numbers. We look at net drop numbers. Well, I just had the Department Chair meeting with six chairs. We went round robin, and I went down through a consecutive absence report. I went down through the new census report, which is in the aggregate, but it's already busted out by program. So, I'm able to go around and say, 'You are doing good, you're doing good.' And I told (Name) and (Name), the IT Chair and the Electronics Chair, that this doesn't look good. We are okay in the aggregate, okay, but (Name) numbers are 5.69 compared to the school average of 3.42. If he got off his butt, and he knows it, we would be at 3 instead of 3.42 because he was dragging us down. And I don't make any bones about this. I told (Name) also a similar kind of thing, okay. I said, 'The days are gone when you could just coast because all those studious nerds of



yours would just show up and succeed. It doesn't work that way anymore. You're going to have to work harder.' But I say that in front of everybody. So, it's a fair game. It's not mean-spirited, but you can't dance around the elephant in the room and succeed. You can't do that.

While his blunt and direct language on the printed page may seem somewhat harsh at first glance, Steve's style and personality relay a different tone in person. A very pleasant person in the sunset of his career, Steve is both humorous and sincere. For him, managerial courage means the ability to have difficult conversations that are open, honest, and behavior-focused (as opposed to judgment-focused). For Steve, it seems to come naturally, and his staff appreciates it. From third-party conversations, it was apparent that Steve's style is most effective because everyone knows where they stand, everyone is held accountable to the same standards, and everyone knows that there is no hidden agenda. Accountability, one important consequence of managerial courage, is about what's best for the students and the organization. It is bigger than any one ego. It's a team effort.

From a different perspective, Sarah expressed regret that she had *not* shown more managerial courage as the tumultuous events in her organization unfolded. As she expressed it in her interview:

So the one thing I think I would do differently was probably be a little more forceful in not allowing people to be placed in the positions that they couldn't do. I think that sometimes what we had were people placed in their positions just because we needed a position filled and they weren't the best performer and it was going to be a detriment overall. Sometimes I went in a little bit too Pollyanna, thinking that they could perform the function because I didn't always want to rock the boat.

In her situation, Sarah failed to exert managerial courage with the senior leaders at the corporate office. As a result, employees were placed in positions throughout the company for which they were not well-qualified. She indicated in the course of her interview that this ended up being one of the major reasons the organization eventually folded and went out of business. It's interesting to note that Sarah, like Steve, had no problems showing managerial courage with their subordinates and equals. In Sarah's case, the difficulty arose in a failure to show managerial courage when faced with ill-conceived decisions by superiors.

**Reflection.** As the universal experiences of our participants around leadership qualities emerged from the data, it became apparent that *reflection* was also very important for the leaders who participated in this exploratory study. Each interviewee indicated at some point in their one-on-one interviews that taking time to separate, pause, and reflect during their experience was vital to successfully navigating the storm that enveloped their organization. David, who served as a leader on one of the boards for a nationally recognized professional association, was very specific in describing how he took the time to separate, pause, and reflect:

I do know one thing, for me personally, investing so much into the interactions and trying to be the person that's always putting out positive information to the opposition, and I think for me, personally, what I have to do is I have to draw back. Once it was finished, I had to tell my board like I need some more alone time, you know, and I had to spend time in my hotel room alone just, you know, I just needed this separation. And part of it was just, I think, the emotional piece, it was emotionally draining, very emotionally draining. We were talking about eight to ten hours that we spent in a board meeting trying to go through all of the stuff and

having, you know, sub committees and different groups that were trying to figure out different things. Emotionally, it was very draining and so I had to, I found myself wanting to separate and I have done that a number of times. ...I just need that alone time and I feel like I can kind of collect my thoughts. I think that's really how it affects me is that I have to separate myself from the situation and become real with myself.

David stresses repeatedly how important it is for him to find time to reflect and become "real" with himself. This implies more than just physical separation or alone time for rest and recreation, although that is important as well. Rather, he expressed the urgent human need for leaders to take time to reflect on their situations, decisions, and options in order to remain spiritually centered. Change can be a very upsetting experience for even the most grounded and experienced leader, which makes it all the more necessary that they take time to reflect and maintain that spiritual balance internally.

Steve, our college Dean participant, also speaks frequently about the need for successful leaders to take time to reflect on what they are doing and who they are – spiritually speaking. In an interesting response to the question of how he manages as a leader during difficult times, he replied:

Well, primarily, I just tell everybody it's going to be all right, because it always is. I mean, you have to have faith in that. You have to trust in your own spiritual center, and so I know who I am, I know what I am doing. I know how to work with people, and when people are tearing their hair out, I pull them back to the basics so that they are reminded of what we are really all about. They get upset about salary. They get upset about not getting textbooks in on time and all those kinds of things. And I just

keep reminding them that the essence of what we do is *student success*, and we don't need textbooks to do that. Okay, we really don't need large salaries to do that. We just need dedication to these people. And if we understand that centering, and you understand in the field of education that what you are doing is a moral issue for the wellbeing of other people, then I don't believe we can go wrong. I mean, I tell the teachers when they are writing a lesson plan that they are making spiritual decisions for the lives of other people.

Steve eloquently describes his earnest belief in the value and importance of reflection for a leader. For him, a successful leader takes the time to ponder and remember who they are and what their mission really is – in his case, to serve the students entrusted to his care. In the midst of trials and tribulations, effective leaders need to step back and remind themselves of what is most important at their core. Who are they as individuals? What is their leadership credo? Who are they there to serve? Students? Clients? Patients? Through reflection, the answers to these questions will direct and guide leaders as they make difficult decisions and plan complex courses of action for their organizations (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

**Significant differences.** At this point, it is important to pause and take note of two significant differences that also emerged in the course of this study regarding leadership qualities that are important during periods of organizational change. One of those unique concepts that surfaced during the data analysis phase of the study is that of *charisma*. While all participants spoke about the need for collaboration and inclusiveness on the part of leaders, one participant suggested that it is also important for a leader to be charismatic. None of the other five touched specifically on this quality. In fact, a charismatic approach

was generally viewed as counter-productive when leaders are trying to collaborate, communicate, develop others, exert managerial courage and reflect.

Diego, former Director of a treatment facility for the clergy, was the sole participant to point out the importance and value of charisma:

I would take a leadership role to actually be the spokesperson for the organization, and if anyone else was approached, I would ask them to defer to me and then I would either appear for them, ask the individual to appear with me and we would have a joint kind of a press conference or whatever regarding the issue. Everyone in the organization knew that as Director of the facility, I was the Director, and I was the ultimate authority, and it stopped there.

He frequently recounts how important it was for the staff in his organization to have someone in authority to look to for protection, emotional support, and encouragement during the challenging period he described. There is definitely a “protective” or even “paternalistic” aspect to how he describes his leadership style. This is not to say that Diego did not discuss the importance of collaboration, as he surely did. Rather, he tended to emphasize the charismatic approach to leadership.

As the Director of the facility, very high expectations were placed upon him to almost single-handedly shepherd the organization out of the period of darkness in which it found itself. In a follow up conversation regarding this interesting difference, Diego explained:

My leadership style is very direct and engaged, but collaborative. I’ll listen to everyone’s input and then, based on that input, I try to incorporate people’s views and respond to whatever the issue may be based on my perspective as the leader of the particular organization. So, I’ll incorporate people’s ideas, and sometimes they can’t

be incorporated, but as much as possible, and then I'll formulate a response based on my role within the organization.

Again, though Diego clearly does profess to value and strive for collaboration, he seems to place significant value and importance on his own role and perspective. Perhaps this is a function of the culture of the organization, which served and was staffed by many current and former members of the clergy? Or, it may be a function of Diego's own personality and leadership style. In either case, it is a notable exception in this study.

Another notable exception surfaced in the interview and follow up conversations with Steve, Dean of the technical college. This concept emerged in a striking way when Steve was asked whether or not there was anything else he wanted to share about the experience he has had as a leader in education for over 30 years. In a thoughtful and matter of fact way, he replied:

I think sometimes you have to be a benevolent dictator. Once you get it flowing well, and you can work together well, and you have people educated enough to understand how to manage in small groups, then you can move into small groups. Okay, but first you have to shape things up. And that happens when you look spiritually at the world with all the prophets. That's exactly what they did, okay. Jesus did it, Buddha, Mohamed, Moses, Abraham and all the prophets that I believe in, okay. They all came with a book of laws. They didn't ask anybody, 'Do you agree?' They said, 'This is the law of God. This will raise up your civilization, and then you filter it down.' Once people get it, then they can start working as a collective, but sometimes they have to be ordered to do it first.

Steve asserts that, although collaboration and small group decision-making is the goal for organizations, sometimes people just need to be directed – at least initially. Upon further discussion with Steve in the follow-up conversations following the initial interview, he made it clear that collaboration is always his preferred method of operating as a leader. However, he noted that when times are rough and time is short a leader does sometimes need to direct without taking the time to get input from everyone affected. In his usual big picture, historical view of reality, our Dean sees interesting parallels between how people behave in societies and their behavior in organizations.

From his point of view, employees don't always have a say in what the rules or expectations are. We don't necessarily ask them if they agree. Rather, leaders set those expectations, communicate them to their staff, and monitor their progress. How they meet those expectations is open for discussion in this tight-loose-tight approach to management – prescribed expectations, flexible about creative means to meet those expectations, and strict accountability for those expectations. He sees collaboration as a quality all leaders definitely need to have and strive for; however, Steve also believes that the *benevolent dictator* approach must be used from time to time.

### **Culture, Power, and Politics**

The second research sub-question asked: What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences? In the interviews, each participant was asked a series of questions about the experiences they had gone through, what the culture of the organization was like, the role power relationships played in the events described, and whether or not office politics played a significant role in those events. The interview transcripts were then reviewed to look for key themes from each individual participant.

Those individual common themes were shared with each participant and discussed to ensure that the essences of the experiences had been captured. The individual analyses for each participant were then reviewed and a composite analysis was created in order to arrive at a close approximation of the universal experience for the overall study group. The composite analysis was then compared to the results of a composite analysis conducted independently by a qualified third-party.

In Figure 4.2, the common themes, significant differences, and select corresponding participant quotes from this study regarding the role of culture, power, and politics are outlined.



Culture		
Common Themes	Significant Differences	Participant Quote
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Transparent</li> <li>▪ Team-oriented</li> <li>▪ Mission-centered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Silos</li> <li>▪ Reactionary</li> </ul>	<p>We were all self-motivated, our culture was, I mean, everyone on our staff was a go-getter. We enjoyed winning, we were competitive, we cared for one another - genuinely cared for one another.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Miranda</p>
Power		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Competitive</li> <li>▪ Unified Leadership</li> <li>▪ Debate/Discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Concentrated</li> <li>▪ Profit-focused</li> </ul>	<p>It was very hierarchical and with no room for collaboration on either side. So, that was the organization that I came into, and then I tried to establish a little bubble at my level in which we spread out and developed a more collaborative effort at that level.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Diego</p>
Politics		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accountability</li> <li>▪ Inclusivity</li> <li>▪ Safe/Caring Work Environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cliques/Alliances</li> <li>▪ Favoritism</li> </ul>	<p>The organization wanted inclusiveness. They came out with a national campaign, almost like a political statement that went out to every member in the organization. And the statement was, 'We value, we honor, all of our members.'</p> <p style="text-align: right;">David</p>

**Figure 4.2: What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences?**

**Culture.** The first theme that emerged from the analysis of the data in this exploratory study regarding the culture of the organization in question was that of *transparency*. The participants indicated during the course of their interviews that a culture

of transparency was very important in order for the organization and the staff to successfully navigate the rough waters that had enveloped them. Miranda speaks of the importance of a culture of transparency as follows:

I believe we had like 25 offices. I really believe, probably from office to office and location to location, it was a different culture locally. Globally, the management style and from our corporate office probably was lacking, just in terms of their own communication, their own being on the same page, as they moved forward. But, I think on the local level, our offices were the best in the company, and it was because of the staff that we had, the ability to actually produce. We were all self-motivated, our culture was, I mean, everyone on our staff was a go-getter. We enjoyed winning, we were competitive, we cared for one another - genuinely cared for one another. So, I think we were transparent with one another.

While the company Miranda worked for did not survive, she makes a critical distinction between the “corporate culture” and the culture at the local level where she was in a leadership role. Those local offices continued to operate and produce longer than any other area of the company, largely due to the culture that had evolved in those offices. Miranda used a transparent approach to communications, decisions, and changes with her staff in the offices where she was the leader.

Secondly, I found in this study that a *team-oriented* culture was identified in the various experiences of the participants. Each of the leaders indicated that their success was very much tied to the close relationships and camaraderie that existed in their departments and/or organizations. As David described it:

I think relationships would be number one. If you are going through any major changes in any organization, whether big or small, you have to have relationships with the people that you are working with. I mean, not necessarily go out and have fun necessarily, but you need to know, you need to be able to have the time to where you have an opportunity to get that, get to know the other people. I had lots of opportunities to do that, so I knew people really well on my particular board. So, that same group, we have been connected together now for over ten years and so we e-mail each other almost on a daily basis and so we developed a strong relationship during that process and we have continued to keep that relationship for now over ten years since we were encountering this major change with the organization.

The members of the board on which David served as a leader were a close, cohesive team that operated in a collective manner. Those relationships, as he described it, were central to the success of the endeavor. Without this team-oriented culture, they may not have successfully worked through the period of change that overtook them. David and his colleagues functioned as one unified group – almost family-like.

Thirdly, the data from this exploratory study suggested that a *mission-centered* culture is crucial in order for an organization to adapt and grow during periods of turmoil and significant change. Without a consistent focus on the mission, vision, and values of the organization, leaders cannot lead effectively. Steve touched on this theme in a direct way:

The culture is all student-centered at our particular site, okay. And, by and large, we are a corporation with like a 127 campuses right now. We go every year to a central management team meeting some place in the nation. They have a major meeting and then the CEO, the President, sends a video to everybody for everybody to watch it.

And so, this last year's was very good. The number one issue on the agenda was student success. And so, yes, we are on the New York Stock Exchange. Yes, we have to have money, we have all of these metrics that we have to follow, but the leader of the band is saying, 'The way we get there is student success.' So, you have to analyze what you are going to do with that.

For Steve, as Dean of his campus, every decision and action must be looked at in terms of how it contributes to the mission of the organization – student success. Everything else is secondary. Even though the organization is a for-profit enterprise, they have not lost sight of their mission. As such, the culture of the organization is nourished, sustained, and guided by that unwavering focus and vision.

In regard to significant differences that emerged from the data, I found that Sarah, Miranda, and Dolores either personally experienced or warned of an organizational culture that operates in *silos*. That is, the organization was not mission-centered or team-oriented. Rather, the various departments and divisions only looked out for their own interests.

Dolores explained this concept as follows:

The culture at (Name) is that a lot of the facilities tend to operate in silos. (Name) has setup the organization to, they give out rewards, the Cup Award, CEO of the Year, CFO of the Year, things like that, Chief Nursing Officer of the Year, and basically, I think because they set it up that way, everybody wants to win, you know. So you've got these competing facilities, but to the community, (Name) is (Name) is (Name). If I go to (Name), I go to (Name), people do not distinguish really in their minds, the west side hospital has this, or the women's hospital has these services. They assume (Name) is (Name) is (Name), and so it's hard because the culture is to protect your

own; each facility is very protective of themselves. So, I think like any organization, change is probably the area that is difficult, especially, like I said, because the culture is to operate in silos.

For Dolores, one of the toughest challenges was to deal with this silo-driven culture. In this particular healthcare system, the various divisions and facilities tend to focus only on their own best interests. The goals are facility-specific in the minds of many of the CEO's and other local executives. Dolores' goal and focus, as a marketing director for the entire system, is to always ask what's best for the system. This causes some friction with the local leaders, however, who tend to look only at their own facilities.

Another significant difference I found in this study was the tendency by some leaders in the organization to behave in a *reactionary* fashion. Rather than making an effort to see events in the context of the bigger picture, some leaders simply reacted to change in a reflexive manner, not pausing to ponder the meaning of those events and formulating a strategic, long term plan. Sarah put it this way:

Well, the leaders ahead of me, the President and Vice-President, just handed everything to us and said we had to go and do something. They gave us no plan. They didn't have any idea what we would be doing, but they wanted us to answer all the questions that they had. So, we turned around, another person and I, and said, and tried to develop a plan how we were going to move forward, and assume different responsibilities, and try to train our staff as quickly as we could to move forward with the company and try not to lose that much profit.

In her case, Sarah was frustrated by the senior leaders of the organization who failed to think strategically and globally. Instead, they simply reacted to events without much rhyme or

reason. In fact, these particular leaders preferred to simply pass the buck down to Sarah and her colleagues in middle management. Luckily for Sarah's staff, she did think globally and took the time to formulate a long term plan to deal with the problems. While the corporate leaders of the organization behaved in a reactionary manner, Sarah clearly did not. This likely prolonged the life of the organization and certainly allowed her employees time to make a smoother transition out of the company altogether.

**Power.** It became clear in the analysis of the data in this exploratory study, regarding the concept of power, that *competition* was a key element. Each of the participants spoke about competition when asked about the role of power relationships in decisions, behaviors, or reactions to events. As Dolores described it:

We've got seven people (CEO's) telling us how they want things to go, and so me, as the local director of the marketing team, I have to decide what's actually going to be best. I am the one who has to keep the system hat on and ask, 'What's best for the system?' I have to keep my staff onboard and on track. There are so many power struggles that go on, I think, as they don't operate as one facility; each hospital is in competition with one another.

Dolores explained in the course of her interview that this healthy competition was good for the organization, as long as it was kept in check. Her role, as the regional marketing director for the organization, oftentimes called upon her to do just that – remind the various local leaders of the overall mission of the system. Competition can be very useful in encouraging people to meet and exceed goals, as long as it does not devolve into a win-lose proposition for the organization overall.

Another similarity that emerged from the data regarding power relationships in the organizations described by the participants is that of *unified leadership*. In order for organizations to be effective, their leaders must all be on the same page. This is not to say that healthy disagreements won't occur. On the contrary, they should be encouraged. It means that, ultimately, leaders must coalesce around the common goal and mission of the organization. As Steve said, "So, we just have to work it out. But, again, we are all pretty blunt with one another. And I don't, you know, I don't try to sidestep any issues. Because of the new director we have, he shares the same view. He is not going to put up with it either." Our Dean stressed the fact that this sort of unified leadership is critical to success. The ship won't get anywhere if leaders are all paddling in a different direction. They will simply go in circles.

This leads us to the central role of *debate and discussion* regarding power relationships. As noted above, unified leadership does not mean that there is no room for disagreements or differing ideas about how to proceed. Debate and discussion is an important tool that leaders can use to arrive at creative and innovative solutions to problems, especially in times of crisis. Once again, our Dean lays it out plainly when he says:

We are all comfortable with one another. Everybody's vocal and they have the right to disagree with me and, in the end, they know that I hold the right to make the final decision and sometimes it's 'no.' And, I don't want to hear it about because, I mean, I'm pretty blunt about that kind of stuff. I'm blunt, I'm honest with people but, like I say, I have such a wonderful team that I don't have to worry about that a whole lot. Steve is open to debate and discussion with his team. He doesn't shy away from conflict; he embraces it with an open mind. However, once the decision is made, he does expect that the

team will support that decision. By all means feel free to disagree and debate, but once a decision has been made every employee is expected to support it and follow through as agreed.

In terms of significant differences that emerged from the data around the question of power relationships, the first would be that power was *concentrated*, or hierarchical in nature. While all of the participants demonstrated the common leadership quality of collaboration personally, it did become apparent that some had experienced the negative consequences of concentrated or top-down power relationships as well. When asked about power relationships at the treatment facility where he had served as the director, Diego replied:

It was very hierarchical and with no room for collaboration on either side. So, that was the organization that I came into, and then I tried to establish a little bubble at my level in which we spread out and developed a more collaborative effort at that level. And that helped the ultimate, let's say the ultimate CEO of the organization. He also explored for himself a different type of organizational style for the future, as a result of the type of publicity and the response that was being given at the time.

The distinction drawn by Diego between his own view of power and that of the hierarchy of the organization is interesting to note. As he states above, the power relationships in the organization were clearly hierarchical, with power concentrated at the top. Diego, on the other hand, came into the organization and proceeded to affect a shift away from this structure to a more collaborative and shared use of power, at least at his own level or “little bubble.” Apparently, largely due to Diego’s efforts and the turmoil and publicity that befell the organization, the “ultimate” CEO also began to experiment with this less hierarchical,



concentrated use of power. This is a refreshing thought, indeed, as Diego was able to initiate a cultural change regarding power organization-wide.

The second significant difference that emerged from the data analysis in this study is that power may be used in a primarily *profit-focused* way. In other words, the organizational power relationships and leadership structure are aligned in such a way that the pursuit of profit outweighs every other consideration, including staff. This was clearly the case for Sarah, where the senior leaders in her organization based every decision on purely financial considerations. As Sarah explained:

The first time that we were told that the company was going to change and we're going to be looking at different profit margins, the choices of this company came down to financial decisions. It was definitely not staff decisions. So, when the accountant told us we needed to cut our budget immediately, then we had to immediately determine which people were going to be let go, and that was tough because there were some people, we knew that the lowest performers were going to be the ones that were let go, and some of those I knew needed their jobs, but it had to happen. So, it was very difficult for me to go through and go to the offices and terminate folks.

For Sarah, it was obvious that the top leadership of the organization based all decisions, especially during this period of significant change, on how to maximize their profit. As she describes above, the well-being of the staff was not a serious consideration for those senior leaders in the corporate office. This was a painful experience for Sarah in that she was the one who had to carry out those decisions and terminate many members of her staff.

Throughout her interview and follow up conversations, Sarah visits this theme with regret

that the senior leaders in the organization failed to think strategically and adapt to the events rather than react based on short-term financial considerations. In the end, Sarah was right, as that organization slowly withered and died.

**Politics.** The first common theme that surfaced in this exploratory study regarding the role of politics in the experiences of the participants is that of *accountability*. Each of the participants spoke of this theme during the course of their interviews, with particular emphasis on the importance of fairness and having common goals. Steve, our Dean, put it this way when asked about the role of politics in his organization:

Not within the education side, but we have to mix it up with five other, four other departments, and there the politics can give somebody some angst. Okay, and when we work with marketing, the head of marketing can be very difficult to deal with, but we are all responsible. We are all responsible for everybody else's goals. So, we just have to work it out, but, again, we are all pretty blunt with one another. And I don't, you know, I don't try to sidestep any issues because of the new director we have, he shares the same view. He is not going to put up with it either.

In this organization, people are held accountable in an open, fair, and transparent manner. Although there may be some competition or difficult relationships among leaders and departments, everyone has the same primary goal – student success. As Steve indicates in his typically blunt style, it's understood throughout the organization that everything else is secondary and political games will not be tolerated. The senior leader of the organization has set the tone regarding accountability. There is clearly no ambiguity as to what the expectations are for his directors, chairs, faculty, and staff.

The importance of *inclusivity* became apparent as well in the data analysis process. Most of the participants indicated that a collaborative and inclusive approach was the way in which they operated as leaders. This theme is slightly different from the common leadership quality of collaboration discussed above, as it really focuses on the importance of ensuring that everyone is invited to participate on teams, projects, and decision-making entities.

David expressed the importance of inclusivity as follows:

The organization wanted inclusiveness. They came out with, I think, it's been four years ago, with a national campaign, but almost like a political statement that went out to every member in the organization of about 80,000 people. And the statement was, 'We value, we honor, all of our members, regardless of their membership status: students, PT's, PTA's, it doesn't matter what their membership is; we value all of them.' So that's what came out, I think, what has evolved from some of those initial discussions of making substantial changes.

As David explains, inclusivity is more than collaboration; it goes an important step further. After all, you could collaborate with the same people over and over again, leaving others out. For this organization, inclusivity meant that everyone was guaranteed the right to full participation, benefits, and membership – no matter their status or title.

The next significant similarity that emerged in this exploratory study regarding the role of politics is the importance of a *safe/caring work environment*. In order for leaders and their staff to function effectively, it is vitally important that the organization provide a work environment that is supportive, nurturing, and appropriate for the tasks at hand. Miranda touched on this concept in describing the offices where she served as manager:

We cared for one another, genuinely cared for one another. We had a safe place to voice our concerns and, I think because of that, we were able to move forward and actually reach our goals, assist one another, and work as a team. There was a lot of camaraderie within our local offices around all of these different aspects. Overall, we had a positive attitude. I think the collaboration, the transparency, and the competition allowed us to thrive through all of those years in those offices.

While the corporate office and other divisions of the organization did not sustain such environments, Miranda's offices prided themselves on their safe/caring work environment. Very much like one's home life, the nature of the work environment will have an enormous impact on one's happiness, creativity, and productivity. In order to maximize each of these characteristics, the work environment in an organization must be safe, caring, and supportive. It is one of the primary responsibilities of every leader to help establish, protect, and sustain such an environment.

As we have seen thus far in regard to the role of politics, the universal themes that were gleaned from our research included accountability, inclusivity, and a safe/caring work environment. While these were discussed to some extent by each of the participants, one significant difference that emerged was that of *cliques and alliances*. This was apparent for Sarah as she described the senior leadership in her organization's corporate office, especially in regard to the role of the mysterious accountant. Diego, director of the treatment facility, described his experience with cliques and alliances as follows:

Some people, consciously or unconsciously, used the opportunity to ingratiate themselves with either myself or form alliances with other individuals in terms of if this scenario or that scenario was going to happen, whether that was true or not. The

politics involved was that it depended on who was perceived to have the most power. People were clustered along the lines of power, or that perception of power, within the organization. So, I tried to consolidate the energy that's expended in terms of cliques or gossip or those kinds of office politics, so that everything ultimately comes to me, and then I can respond directly to that.

As Diego recounts his experience, it was clearly a struggle for him to confront the existence of cliques and alliances in his organization as it strove to withstand the chaotic swirl of publicity that surrounded it. These groups, aligned along lines of perceived power, threatened to derail Diego's efforts to lead the organization during this difficult period. The overall goal and mission of the facility could have easily been eclipsed by the self-interest, divisiveness, and jockeying that classically accompanies the formation of cliques and alliances. As the Director, Diego was astute enough to recognize this phenomenon and work to block and defuse it in his organization. Listening to Diego's recollection of his experience, it is hard to imagine how they could have weathered the storm otherwise.

Another significant difference that I found in this exploratory study around the question of politics is the problem of *favoritism*. While Diego indicated that he intentionally worked to avoid and dispel any whiff of favoritism in his organization, Sarah had quite a different experience. She illustrated her point using the following example:

It is a very interesting story. About the time we were opening a (Name of City) office, and we had – I had – made great inroads into some great accounts out there, and we really needed to get a full-time person out there. So we were hiring a full-time person, she was at our executive office, and we were trying to find a bigger spot. We made a big deal of the VP and me going to (Name of City) and interviewing a

potential secretary for the office out there. I remember meeting her at a restaurant, and the VP and I we had a regular interview for about an hour. She seemed lovely, so we were thinking about hiring her, going through checking references, etc. So, we come back home, go through the rigmarole and hired her and she ended up being a fine secretary. When the company was slowing down and going under, the truth came to fruition, which was that the VP had met this girl long before we interviewed her. She (the VP) had met her through the realtor of where they bought their home out in (Name of City) and had told her to pretend that the VP didn't know her, and just go through the interview with me. So I think that pretty much tells the story.

While this story may demonstrate one of the more extreme displays of favoritism, Sarah indicated that she had witnessed many more subtle acts of favoritism throughout her time in the organization – especially around family members of top executives. This favoritism existed primarily in the corporate office and was practiced mainly by the senior leadership of the organization.

For her part, Sarah made it clear that no such favoritism existed in her region of the company. On the contrary, when it came time to let people go, Sarah based those decisions purely on performance and productivity. As she said, “As far as favoritism, I don't think that even if somebody was somebody's best friend, if they weren't performing, I don't think they would have been allowed to stay.” This is one lesson the senior leadership of the now defunct company could have clearly learned from one of their regional directors.

### **Complex Adaptive Systems, Quantum Physics, and Self-organizing Systems**

The third research sub-question asked: How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and

interpret these experiences? In the interviews, each participant was asked a series of questions about the experiences they had gone through, how they tried to deal with the situation, how they addressed the concerns of others, how they were affected by the experience, and whether they saw a common theme in retrospect. The interview transcripts were then reviewed to look for key themes from each individual participant. Those individual common themes were shared with each participant and discussed to ensure that the essences of the experiences had been captured. The individual analyses for each participant were then reviewed and a composite analysis was created in order to arrive at a close approximation of the universal experience for the overall study group. The composite analysis was then compared to the results of a composite analysis conducted independently by a qualified third-party.

In Figure 4.3, the common themes, along with an interesting participant comment, that emerged from this study regarding the role of complex adaptive systems theory, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems theory are outlined. It is important to note that no significant differences were found among the participants in relation to this research question.

Complex Adaptive Systems	Participant Quote
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Networking</li> <li>▪ Empowerment</li> <li>▪ Systems thinking</li> </ul>	<p>Another thing I learned is that to be a manager you don't have to be a micro-manager. Sometimes you have to be with certain people and you have to learn who those people are, but I think the most important thing is you're helping them manage their own projects.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Dolores</p>
Quantum Physics	Participant Quote
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interrelatedness</li> <li>▪ Perception</li> <li>▪ Willpower</li> </ul>	<p>I don't think of things as fearful; I actually embrace all changes whether I expect them or don't expect them. I ask, 'Why is this change coming forth?' It basically means it's time to move to another level. So, now I just embrace those changes and it has created just so much fun for me. It literally has created fun about what's next in your life, you know, and to move into that and see what things that you may have had inside you that have been dormant, or you don't even know existed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Miranda</p>
Self-organizing Systems	Participant Quote
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Necessity of Change</li> <li>▪ Apparent Chaos</li> <li>▪ Flexibility</li> </ul>	<p>I think that I am a different management style as the environment requires me to be. So, I think if there is something where you need a stronger leader than that's what I'm going to be. But, I try to read my staff and see what type of management style works best for them. Maybe I'm more of a chameleon that way.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sarah</p>

**Figure 4.3: How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret these experiences?**

**Complex Adaptive Systems.** The first prominent characteristic that surfaced in this exploratory study regarding complex adaptive systems theory in the experiences of the participants is that of *networking*. As is central to the premise of this theory, relationships are



absolutely critical to the success of any leader in an organization. This would correlate with the common themes presented above of collaboration, communication, and team-orientation.

As David described this concept in his interview:

I think relationships would be number one. If you are going through any major changes in any organization, whether big or small, you have to have relationships with the people that you are working with. And, by relationships I mean not necessarily go out and have fun necessarily, but you need to know, you need to be able to have the time to where you have an opportunity to get to know the other person. I had a lot of opportunities to do that, so I knew people really well. On my particular board we have lots of retreat types of things, and some were outside of the organization.

For David, the establishing and nurturing of interpersonal relationships proved to be number one on his list of requirements for success. This focus on the importance of networking with his colleagues, in and out of the work environment, can be found throughout his interview. Ultimately, the bonds formed through this networking process proved to be strong enough to withstand the attempt to tear apart the professional association where he served as a board member. Due to those relationships, the people in the three different boards simply could not bring themselves to separate or disenfranchise other members of the association. Networking laid the solid foundation that could not be broken, even by the intense pressure that was placed upon them.

Another result regarding the implications from complex adaptive systems theory that emerged from my research involves the idea of *empowerment*. Not only do effective leaders need to be able to network with others in the organization, but they also need to allow a

certain degree of freedom and creativity *in* those relationships. This theme is closely related to the ideas of developing others and a safe/caring work environment as presented above.

When employees feel empowered to make decisions, formulate plans, and take action, they tend to be more effective in their work. The leader, then, must encourage this creativity and autonomy whenever possible. As Dolores indicated from her experience;

Another thing I learned is that to be a manager you don't have to be a micro-manager. Sometimes you have to be with certain people and you have to learn who those people are, but I think the most important thing is you're helping them manage their own projects. So that's something that I have learned as well, is helping them manage their projects and helping them not be stressed out when things are crazy, helping them determine what's important, what could be shifted down on their list of things - walk them through that, you know.

As Dolores explained in her interview, a significant lesson for her was to shy away from micro-managing and allow her staff to function independently as much as possible. She empowered and supported her employees in their job duties and, in the process, developed a happier and more creative staff. Such an approach will also prevent the leader from taking on additional tasks herself, which is not an insignificant side-effect by any means.

The importance of *systems thinking* by leaders in organizations, especially during turbulent times, also emerged from the data in this exploratory study regarding complex adaptive systems theory. This theme aligns nicely with the common theme of thinking globally discussed above. Systems thinking is required in order for the players in any complex adaptive system to successfully understand, manipulate, and navigate that system.

While not the only players involved, leaders are very important “tags” or catalysts in this regard. As Steve, our Dean, put it in his own *really* big picture perspective:

There are all kinds of ripple effects. What happened to the world because of Buddha and Krishna and Jesus and Mohammad, what ripple effect happened? What ripple effect is happening right now because of Benedict being Pope, okay? When you look at all those kinds of things and you draw it back from the whole thing, I have personal faith that the whole thing is going to come out alright and the world is going to be united, okay, because that’s our next spiritual step, and we will be refining it for the next 1000 years. And so, given that, you know, you just have to work harder, like we know what we are doing. I tell this to people and, you know, this is a moral issue with us. We are responsible for this, and I tell this to the students. We are responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of these students so that they will succeed. So that they will have a life and, if they’re first generation college student, they are going to raise up their children now to be college students or go into a trade school or whatever. What we are doing right now with our handful of people is going to create this domino effect for the next thousand years in those families. I am the eternal optimist.

As such, Steve sees the connection between what he and his staff are doing at the college with the well-being of an entire generation of people and their descendants to come. This is an excellent example of systems thinking. A “Level Five Leader” (Collins, 2001) must be able to see well beyond the current project, dilemma, or state of the organization. If leaders are able to think in a system-oriented way, they will never lose sight of the far reaching

implications, ripple effects, and interrelatedness of their existence. This is true for leaders in healthcare, private industry, and education alike. Remarkable, if one thinks about it.

**Quantum Physics.** In relation to the central concepts of quantum physics in the experiences of the participants, the concept of *interrelatedness* proved to be of significance. A major assertion made in quantum physics studies is that an invisible force surrounds everything in the universe and that everything, therefore, only exists in relation to everything else – regardless of proximity. Relationship is the key determiner of *everything*. Similarly, each participant indicated through the course of the study how important it is for a leader to realize the strong connections that exist within an organization (internal and external) and how those relationships can be used as a tool or, if not appreciated, lead to disaster.

Sarah, whose company did not survive, suggested that a failure by the organization to recognize the interrelatedness of the staff and different offices throughout the company helped speed its demise:

I think that within our company, we had seen this. That it was as if we almost had many companies, because the divisions were run so differently. And some were collaborative, one was fearlessly dictatorial, and one just ran a muck and didn't have a lot of supervision at all, so that the culture was confused, I would say, at best. And I remember, particularly, the most confused area's people calling into the corporate office all the time, trying to figure out what was going on because nobody ever thought to include them in any of the decisions.

In Sarah's case, it is abundantly clear that the leadership failed to realize the interrelatedness of the organizational system in which they operated. As such, each division was run differently by its leadership. With no sense of connection and a common function, the staff

in many parts of the company became disconnected, confused, and frustrated. This engendered a culture of fear and suspicion, which in turn helped to seal the fate of the organization. It simply could not and did not survive the challenges that it faced.

The second commonality that emerged from the data regarding the implications of quantum physics in the experiences of the participants is that of *perception*. As quantum physics theory asserts, nothing exists independently. Reality does not exist until it is perceived to exist by someone. As such, perception is reality, and every leader must be cognizant of that fact. Diego, director of the treatment facility, shared a very interesting story emphasizing precisely this point. When asked about how others in the organization reacted to the apparent chaos that confronted them, he recounted how it all depended on the individual perceptions:

Yeah, the non-professional staff, which would be like what I'd like to call the support staff, typically develop correlated to education, to their educational level, would respond more negatively or more in terms of a catastrophic result, thinking like the worst case scenario. The other, the professional staff would respond again quite negatively and wanted to shy away from whatever the issue might have been, and even the people higher up beyond my level in the organization or in the parent corporations that I was under their umbrella, they typically were running away also. There was not a, there was a lot of fear and a lot of a, let's see, what would we call that behavior, not wanting to respond positively or affirmatively, but rather waiting for negativity to come and seek them out or in a very objectified fashion. So, that's how people around me were responding, and I thought I would turn it around and have them work for me rather than against me. So, sort of turning it around and then,

again, that was my response in order to respond to it directly and that way allay the fear in terms of the fantasy because, again, I had found that any kind of negative fantasies allowed to simmer overtime would then affect morale and then there is a lack of success in terms of the organization, individual, and on a staff or department level. So, that was my response anyway.

As Diego illustrates in his response above, the perceptions of the staff and others in the organization directly determined the realities he had to deal with as the director. Diego recognized that people's perception *was* their reality. Once he had identified what those perceptions were, Diego could then go about discussing, challenging, and even changing those perceptions. In the end, as perceptions changed, so did reality. This phenomenon is at the core of how Diego was able to successfully lead his organization through the crisis they faced.

The next significant result identified in the composite analysis conducted in this exploratory study as relates to quantum physics theory is that of *willpower*. As quantum physics would suggest, we are able to change, affect, and influence reality by using our positive, yet powerful, thoughts. We can quite literally will events and transformations in our reality; in fact, we are physically hard-wired in our brains to do so. Miranda talks about how her appreciation and faith in willpower not only carried her and the staff through the turmoil they faced but ultimately led her to newer and more exciting opportunities:

The biggest lesson I learned is the one I spoke of, which was fear. Because fear, fear immobilizes us, you know, it actually can paralyze you and so until, with anything, you have to then step out on faith to keep moving, you have to, when we don't know. The unknown is the scariest thing ever for anyone, but sometimes you need to step

out into the unknown to find those answers, and it pushes you, it makes you grow, you have no choice but to grow in the face of fear, to actually confront that fear and move forward. So that was the biggest lesson for me, and it played out then on the rest of my life, on different choices I had to make later in life. I don't think of things as fearful; I actually embrace all changes whether I expect them or don't expect them. I ask, 'Why is this change coming forth?' It basically means it's time to move to another level. So, now I just embrace those changes and it has created just so much fun for me. It literally has created fun about what's next in your life, you know, and to move into that and see what things that you may have had inside you that have been dormant, or you don't even know existed. They can come forth based on change that you never knew was coming your way.

As Miranda so eloquently describes, the greatest lesson she took away from her experience was an appreciation for and deep faith in her own intrinsic willpower. Rather than allow the negativity of the situation to destroy her, Miranda literally chose to see the opportunities for growth that were also present in that situation. Through an incredible willpower, Miranda changed her own reality and created a new and lucrative career for herself, even as the organization crumbled around her. Today, she looks back on this very difficult experience, what Mezirow (2000) would call a "disorienting dilemma," as a precious gift from the universe. Amazing.

**Self-organizing Systems.** The first prevalent idea that surfaced in this exploratory study in relation to the key principles of self-organizing systems theory in the experiences of the participants is that of the *necessity of change*. As self-organizing systems theory suggests, change is an absolute requirement in order for any system to survive, grow, and

thrive. Without change, a system would simply stagnate, decay, and die. This can be seen in nature, for example, with a lake or body of water. Without a continuous in-flow and out-flow of water, occasional drought and floods, or churning storms, lakes and ponds would die.

Miranda frequently commented on the necessity of change in her participation in our study. When asked how the experience had affected her, she replied:

It was probably one of the best experiences I could have gone through at that point in my life, and like I said for myself, I had been with that company for 12 years, and so in that 12 years, it does create a comfort zone, and so in that comfort zone we get comfortable in all aspects. So when that change happened, it actually forced me to move, it forced me to think more about my future and what the next phase of my life was going to be. The beauty of it for me was being in there for 12 years, I always did and still say that it was one position that incorporated everything, that just, gosh, it improved every skill I have. I was working with different populations and the different multitasking and learning about different vocations, networking, marketing - I mean it really allowed me to learn and get skilled initially in all of those areas, which I think was the best thing that could have happened to me, as I moved into the next aspect of my life.

Once again, Miranda does an excellent job of illustrating the point. Without the change that was thrust upon her and the organization, she would not have moved on. She had grown comfortable, stagnate. However, as a direct result of the change that occurred in her organization, Miranda was able to recognize just how much she had grown and could then continue to learn, expand, and thrive. As Miranda suggests, this would never have happened if it weren't for the turmoil that befell the organization.



Another central concept that emerged from the data in terms of self-organizing systems theory is that of *apparent chaos*. The key word here is “apparent,” as self-organizing systems theory would suggest that the survival and growth of systems (from the universe to the Earth, to nations, to organizations, and even an individual organism) is sustained by a few key principles that express the system’s overall identity combined with high levels of autonomy for individuals within that system (Wheatley, 2006). Any open system has the capacity to respond to change and disorder by reorganizing itself at a higher level of organization. Disorder becomes a critical player, an ally that can provoke a system to self-organize into new forms of being. The various ice-ages are examples of this in action at the planetary level. The same is true in any open system, such as an organization.

Steve, Dean of a technical college, repeatedly emphasized throughout his interview the nature of chaos as only apparent to us, but with a grander scheme in the end. When asked directly about chaos, he replied:

Well, it’s something I look forward to, is nothing to shy away from. We are going to be, I mean, you know, my feeling about what we are going to do, that we are going to establish a world commonwealth and there is going to be one world religion and so forth. There is going to be mega changes, and this is going to happen exponentially over the next 100 years. So, when you look that kind of thing...now, I’m not, but I’m not worried about it. Because people started to say, ‘Well, what’s going to happen?’ or ‘This was going to happen.’ My feeling about it is that we have never failed and we never will. We will come up with something. Every time we turn around we come into a new design and resolve it.

As Steve indicates above, any open system must experience periods of change and apparent chaos in order to grow and thrive. The role of the leader is to embrace this phenomenon and see it as necessary and temporary, with a higher level of order in the end though not always readily discernable. Such is the case whether he is discussing his college, national politics, international relations, or world religions. Steve is a consistent systems thinker.

Lastly, *flexibility* surfaced as an important characteristic regarding self-organizing systems theory in the composite analysis of the data. In order for any open system to live and grow, change is necessary. While this change may appear to be disorganized chaos, there is a certain level of order nonetheless, though not always visible to those involved. As such, it is important that the actors in such an open system remain flexible and willing to adapt. In an organization, leaders serve as influential actors who must demonstrate such flexibility.

In her role as district manager, Sarah spoke about the importance of flexibility for her:

I'm a meld of different leadership styles. I'm definitely not, I don't think I fall under any particular management style. I think that I am a different management style as the environment requires me to be. So, I think if there is something where you need a stronger leader than that's what I'm going to be. But, I try to read my staff and see what type of management style works best for them. Maybe I'm more of a chameleon that way. So, I can see what I need to be to fulfill that management supervision for a particular staff member.

While Sarah's company did not eventually survive, her division proved to be the most resilient and productive until the end when the corporate leaders closed the doors. She

continuously references her ability to be flexible and to always have a number of options and plans ready for any situation as one of the main reasons for her personal and professional success as a leader.

## **Summary**

Chapter Four has reported the results of this exploratory study, as well as a discussion of the common themes and significant differences that emerged from the data. I addressed each research question through an analysis of the interview audio recordings, written transcripts, and follow up discussions. Those individual analyses were reviewed and discussed with the participants in order to ensure their accuracy and validity. A composite analysis of the individual data was then conducted, which resulted in the common themes and significant differences presented in this chapter. Additionally, third party observations were collected and documented when possible, and a second composite analysis was conducted by an independent third party in order to ensure reliability.

The participants' worldview became the main determinant of their responses to the individual interview questions. All six participants expressed a generally positive worldview, indicating that they expected and embraced change in their organizations as an opportunity to grow and improve. Common qualities that leaders must possess as they help guide an organization through periods of change were presented and discussed. The roles of culture, power, and politics in the experiences of our participants were also addressed. Finally, we discussed how the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems might help to explain the universal experiences of our participants. Interrelated themes and significant differences, where appropriate, were presented to illustrate the essence of the universal experience of the participants who took part in this

study. Chapter Five addresses what these findings mean in the larger research context and presents some concluding comments.

## Chapter V

### Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to construct a rich and accurate description of the “universal experience” of individuals who have had similar experiences as leaders in organizations during periods of change, chaos, and turmoil. I hoped to shed some light on the complex and unique role that leadership plays in those experiences and develop a better common understanding of different approaches that leadership has used during those challenging times. In addition to adding to the body of knowledge related to organizational leadership, this research study was conducted in order to add in some way to the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems. The findings of the study were presented and discussed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five summarizes the findings and compares them to the current literature on organizational leadership, complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems. Additionally, implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.

The primary question guiding this exploratory research study asked:

*What role does leadership in organizations play in successfully pushing an organization to the edge (embracing chaos or disequilibrium) in order to affect positive change and/or transformation?*

In relation to this overall question, I collected and analyzed the data from the study participants considering the following sub-questions:

1. What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide the organization through periods of change?
2. What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders’ experiences?

3. How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret these experiences?

This chapter will accomplish two objectives: First, I will present a summary of the study, along with a discussion of how those findings are set within the context of the literature. Second, I will discuss the implications of the findings for current practice, the contributions of the study to research, limitations and reflections on the methodology used, and suggestions for future research.

### **Summary of Study**

The findings revealed that each participant's individual experience as a leader during times of organizational change was unique; however, some interesting commonalities and differences emerged within the group. After conducting the interviews with all participants, the recordings were transcribed. I then verified the consistency of the written transcripts with the digital recordings. These interview transcripts from the six participants were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological approach, as described in Chapter Three. Common themes emerged from the data after a series of readings and comparisons of the responses to the original interview questions. Subsequently, an analysis of the themes from the interview transcriptions was conducted in light of the three major research questions of this exploratory study for each individual participant. From those individual themes and experiences, a composite review was conducted to discover any common themes and/or significant differences in the experiences of the participants. These themes were compared with the current literature on leadership, organizational learning, complex adaptive systems theory, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems theory discussed in Chapter Two.

After sending the transcripts and preliminary individual thematic analyses to the participants for member-checking purposes, I completed the composite thematic analysis described above. By using an interpretive phenomenological approach for the analysis of the interview transcripts, the universal essence of the experiences of the participants emerged from the data.

**Universal Theme: Worldview.** In reviewing the data, the participants' worldview became the main determinant of their responses to the individual interview questions. All six participants expressed a generally positive worldview, indicating that they expected and embraced change in their organizations as an opportunity to grow and improve.

The optimistic worldview and willingness to *embrace change* expressed by the participants in this exploratory study confirms the assertion made by Goleman & McKee (2003) that a leader's intrinsic skills and qualities, or emotional intelligence, even more than their intellect, is the primary driver of whether or not that leader can successfully encourage the creation of an organizational culture that responds positively to change and is able to adapt and grow in response to that change. In the words of these authors, "The fundamental task of leaders, we argue, is to prime good feeling in those they lead. That occurs when a leader creates *resonance* – a reservoir of positivity that frees the best in people" (p. 9). Each of our participants indicated that they possess an intrinsic sense of optimism about the future and welcomed change as an opportunity for growth and improvement.

Similarly, these findings appear to be consistent with the work of Deal & Peterson (1999) suggesting that the primary focus of leaders must be on creating a positive, empowering, and encouraging atmosphere in the organization. What they termed "atmosphere" might also be called "culture" for the purposes of this study. An

organizational culture that is moving away from the all too typical command and control model of organizational structure based on organizational charts or chains of command cluttered with boxes, rows, and solid or dotted lines.

As leaders, the participants in this exploratory study shared their optimistic view of change with other members of their organizations, much like a virus is passed from person to person. It permeated their leadership style, behaviors, words, and strategic planning. That positive attitude is, in fact, infectious. It was particularly palpable in the interview process during the course of this study. As Bolman & Deal (2006) suggest in their work *The Wizard and the Warrior: Leading with Passion and Power*, in order to be successful, leaders must shift their primary focus. While leadership has traditionally put most of its energy into the structural aspects of organizations, it must now shift towards the political and the symbolic “frames” that make up organizations.

This is not to say that the participants’ experiences were not difficult, challenging, or even painful. Rather, they each recognized the necessity of the struggles and hardships associated with change in order for organizations to survive, grow, and thrive. And sometimes, as was the case for three of our participants (Sarah, Diego, and Miranda), the organization will die. But even then, something new and exciting will come from that experience. As such, the results of this exploratory study confirm the assertion made by Bolman & Deal (2006) that a greater focus on the political and symbolic frames of an organization will be a significant determining factor in the fate of that organization.

**Leadership qualities.** In Figure 5.1, the common leadership qualities that emerged from this study are listed, along with some notable differences. In Chapter Four, I presented a detailed and vivid illustration of each of these qualities and how they were described in the



words and experiences of the participants. What follows is a discussion around how these themes relate to existing literature regarding leadership theory.

Common Themes	Significant Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Embraces Change</li> <li>▪ Collaborative</li> <li>▪ Good Communicator</li> <li>▪ Thinks Globally</li> <li>▪ Develops Others</li> <li>▪ Managerial Courage</li> <li>▪ Reflection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Charismatic</li> <li>▪ Benevolent Dictator</li> </ul>

**Figure 5.1: What qualities do leaders possess as they help guide an organization through periods of change?**

In regard to the common leadership theme of *collaboration* identified in the data analysis for this exploratory study, I found a significant correlation with the current literature. Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey (2007) have been at the forefront in this area of leadership studies, advancing the line of thinking they termed Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), based on their previous work on Complex Adaptive Systems Theory. As was illustrated in chapter four using the verbatim responses from the participants, collaboration through the building, empowering, and supporting of relationship networks is crucial for leaders to be successful – especially in times of change or turmoil.

As Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey (2007) suggest, “Much of leadership thinking has failed to recognize that leadership is not merely the influential act of an individual or individuals but rather is embedded in a complex interplay of numerous interacting forces” (p. 302). Collaboration is a key quality that successful leaders must possess. Only then can they

serve as the “tags” or catalysts whose primary function is to build relationships and foster the creation of complex networks throughout an organization. As was demonstrated in this study, each of the participants relied heavily on collaboration, relationship-building, and networking in order to navigate the choppy waters in which they found themselves. Not one of the participants suggested that they were able to go it alone. Collaboration and teamwork formed the bedrock of their leadership strategy.

It also became apparent in the data that, in order to be successful in this critical role of encouraging the creation of collaborative networks, a leader must be a *good communicator*. In her research on leadership theory, Slater (2008) focuses on describing how school leaders use communication strategies and skills in order to “foster the empowerment” of other members of the organization by using very specific communication techniques.

While the purpose of this study is not focused only on the leadership quality of communication, I did find certain similar elements (or subsets) below the surface of the common leadership quality termed here as *good communicator*. Specifically, they included effective listening, articulate speech, good writing skills, excellent non-verbal skills, approachability, and transparency. Each of the participants not only exhibited these qualities during their one-on-one interviews and follow up conversations, but alluded to them frequently as important qualities related to their experiences.

In order to further stress the importance and value of collaboration and communication, it is worth noting the work of Bensimon and Neumann (1993). They would suggest, and the results of this study confirm, that in order to foster collaboration one must be a good communicator. The data from this study identified specific leadership competencies that are necessary in order for leaders to successfully foster collaboration. Included in these

important leadership qualities are the ability to relate to and appreciate the perspectives of others, the ability to demonstrate good social skills, the ability to engage in difficult dialogue, and the ability to learn through ongoing critical reflection. Each of these competencies relates directly or indirectly to a leader's ability to communicate effectively with others. All are very personal and internally focused, reaffirming the premise that the leadership qualities that are most critical during times of change are in the realm of the affective domain, not necessarily the structural frame.

As Deal & Peterson (1999) describe it, effective leaders are visionary, working with others and the community to define a value-focused picture of the future. This vision is not static, however. A leader must have a vision that is ever-evolving and adapting to the organizational culture and business environment. Similarly, the participants in this study all spoke of their ability to think globally and see the bigger picture, especially in the midst of their change experiences. Whether it was David's ability to never lose sight of what his professional association stood for (inclusive membership and greater power in numbers), or Steve's not so delicate reminders that everything the college does is for the good of the students entrusted to its care. I found this mission-centered theme in Miranda's persistent focus and concern for the clients and staff no matter what happened to the organization, and Dolores' focus on what's good for the entire healthcare system above the desires of any particular local facility. Each shared the importance of thinking globally as they led their organizations through difficult periods.

In this exploratory study, the participants all spoke of the importance of *developing others* as an important leadership quality. Sarah was constantly concerned "about her people" and making sure that they knew what was happening and provided opportunities to

grow and develop into new potential service lines in order to adapt to the organizational change. Similarly, Miranda consciously focused not only on her own professional development but also on that of her staff so that they might be able to transition to gainful employment as the organization slowly fell apart. Dolores constantly encouraged and supported her staff to grow and move out of their comfort zones as her organization went through a challenging merger process, giving them new and difficult assignments. Additionally, every participant spoke of frequent and regular one-on-one meetings with their individual employees as well as full staff meetings as central to their leadership style. As Slater (2008) summarized this concept, it is the true role of a leader to “build human capacity and self-knowledge in order to develop human potential” (p. 55).

At the same time, a leader must be skilled at having difficult conversations not only with his subordinates but also with his equals and superiors, with generally greater risk entailed in the latter. As Sarah recounted in her interview and follow up conversations, she was called upon to demonstrate *managerial courage* in her conversations with her subordinates who needed to be informed of the impending changes in the organization, some of which would affect them in a very real and personal manner. While she didn't flinch at having what Senge (2003) would call “difficult dialogues” with her staff, Sarah did express regret that she did not demonstrate such courage in her conversations with the senior leaders at the corporate office. As she said, “I didn't want to rock the boat.” Steve, on the other hand, prided himself that he was not fearful or timid about having difficult conversations with his staff, equals, or superiors.

In the end for Steve, all that mattered was the mission of the organization – service to the students. Or, for David, all-inclusive membership in the professional association was the

mission. All other concerns, while important, were secondary to the mission of the organization. Exerting such managerial courage does not always mean playing the role of the “warrior,” as described by Bolman & Deal (2006), although there are definitely rare occasions that will call for the warrior leader to emerge. Rather, in most instances, managerial courage will be required in the daily conversations leaders have with their subordinates, equals, and superiors. Conversations and difficult dialogues aimed at how best to achieve the organization’s mission.

As we have seen in the preceding pages, the results of this study suggest that an effective leader must foster collaboration, be a skilled communicator, think globally, develop others, and demonstrate managerial courage. While these characteristics and the various skills and behaviors that each entails are quite the challenge for anyone, none is possible without *reflection*. This is particularly important in today’s rapidly changing world, where knowledge and technology are advancing exponentially. In this environment, leaders are called upon more than ever to keep the pace. According to Bateson (1994), survival in a rapidly changing world depends on learning that results in adaptation and improvisation, learning that occurs through reflection on experience.

Among the participants in this exploratory study, Sarah indicated that she frequently reflected on the status and direction of her organization. When she found herself in a position of having to give very bad news to her staff regarding the future of the company, Sarah took the time to reflect on the circumstances and chart a course of action in response to those rapidly changing and threatening events. As Gonzalez-Sullivan and Wiessner (2010) concluded in their study of reflection for college presidents:

Reflection seems to be a natural process for some, while for others it must be learned and practiced. It may begin as an apparently extraneous activity, almost artificial, but needs eventually to become internal, a continuous process, a life-long disposition, and a consciously applied means for greater effectiveness in leadership. Reflection can be hard work, extra work, but its benefits are immeasurable in both personal and professional terms. (p. 49)

For Sarah, the reflective process was something she identified in retrospect rather than a consciously initiated act. Nevertheless, Sarah clearly relied on reflection in order to survive the tumultuous events that befell her and the organization.

David, on the other hand, was very specific about his need to pause and ponder as he helped to lead the organization through a period of difficult choices. He recounted his need and desire to “separate himself” from the situation, retreating to his hotel room in order to reflect on the challenges that the association faced. His colleagues even made fun of David and his predictable need to “escape.” Steve, our Dean, stressed the importance of reflection and the need for leaders to “remain spiritually grounded” as they attempted to deal with difficult situations in their organizations. He takes the time to reflect and meditate on a daily basis, never losing sight of the bigger picture and how he and his organization fit into that global picture. Diego, former director of the treatment facility for clergy, shared that he alternated between periods of intense one-on-one and group discussions with his staff and personal time for reflection on his own experiences, perspectives, and action plans. Like the other participants, he also needed to slow down and reflect prior to taking action.

**Culture, Power, and Politics.** In Figure 5.2, the common themes and significant differences that emerged from this study regarding the role of culture, power, and politics are outlined.

Slater (2008) asserts that “creating an environment or *culture* that unleashes the creativity and energy of people, that supports their natural desire to make a contribution, and that motivates them to want to contribute is a challenge for leaders today” (p. 56). As I found in this study, the culture must include certain common characteristics such as transparency, a team-oriented atmosphere, and a mission-centered purpose. Only then will the people in the organization be able to unleash the wonderful creativity necessary to adapt, grow, and thrive. Without these qualities, an organization and its leaders will degenerate into isolated and self-centered silos with leadership that reacts to change rather than embraces change. As Deal & Peterson (1999) point out, this is no easy task, since the culture of an organization encompasses an enormous arena. Culture permeates everything else in the organization, much like the air surrounds our world or water fills the sea. This approach takes the old view of *power relationships* in organizations and turns it on its head. As we see in any complex adaptive system, leadership relies on organizational identity, apparent chaos, social networks, and interdependent emergent outcomes.

Culture	
Common Themes	Significant Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Transparent</li> <li>▪ Team-oriented</li> <li>▪ Mission-centered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Silos</li> <li>▪ Reactionary</li> </ul>
Power	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Competitive</li> <li>▪ Unified Leadership</li> <li>▪ Debate &amp; Discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Concentrated</li> <li>▪ Profit-focused</li> </ul>
Politics	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accountability</li> <li>▪ Inclusivity</li> <li>▪ Safe/Caring Work Environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cliques &amp; Alliances</li> <li>▪ Favoritism</li> </ul>

**Figure 5.2: What role do organizational culture, power, and politics play in leaders' experiences?**

According to Schneider & Somers (2006), the more traditional role of leaders as independent directors and dictators of events has evolved into a model in which leadership affects change and transformation in an indirect and often uncertain fashion:

...leaders serve as tags and influence other persons and processes. They frequently lead without authority and often do so in a temporary capacity. Leaders might consciously initiate their leadership role, or might accept the role that has been given to them. Leaders might be unaware of their role, as others might also be unaware, but nonetheless leaders might emerge. As tags are associated with action and outcomes, not necessarily with individuals or positions, one might co-function as leader, sharing the role in tandem. (p. 356)



Leaders, then, are change agents that encourage and support a healthy competition among their staff while never losing sight of the mission and vision of the organization. Through rigorous debate and discussion around decisions and potential courses of action, a sense of unified leadership can emerge. Power is shared, not concentrated or hierarchical. Decisions are mission-centered, rather than purely based on profit margins and other financial considerations. As outlined above, the organizations that managed to survive through significant turmoil in this study clearly embraced this broader view of power.

Pertaining to the role of *politics*, it is interesting to recall the importance of culture, power and politics in organizational learning theory. As described in *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, by Bolman & Deal (2003), what is needed in order for an organization to be effective are *effective leaders* who are “benevolent politicians” (p. 204). This characterization, though complex and wide reaching, would include such key skills as the ability to set a positive agenda, map the political terrain, effectively use negotiation and bargaining skills, and build influential networks and coalitions. For this study, I would include the key concepts of accountability, inclusivity, and a safe/caring work environment as outlined in chapter four. Combined, these leadership skills can and will have a major impact on the ability of an organization to learn, grow, and embrace change.

This symbiotic relationship between organizational politics and organizational learning is a vital pre-requisite in order for a complex system, such as a company, to adapt, grow, and thrive. In *Managing the Unknowable: Strategic Boundaries between Order and Chaos*, Stacey (1992) asserts:

Since the long-term future of a dynamic system is unknowable because cause-and-effect links are lost in the detail of what happens, the long-term control of a business has to take a form different from that pictured by the received wisdom. These forms are political interactions and complex learning. They are essentially self-organizing forms of control, and those at the top of the organization contribute to these forms of control indirectly, by creating a climate in which complex learning and healthy political interaction can thrive. Political interaction and complex learning are the only forms of control suitable for handling open-ended change, which dominates the long-term future of a business. (p. 149)

As I have found in the data derived from this exploratory study, the participants repeatedly stressed the importance of a leader's ability to understand and influence organizational culture, power relationships, and political interactions. In so doing, the organization is more likely to focus on the long-term mission and goals, rather than reactionary, short-sighted, or self-interested approaches (what Stacey calls "received wisdom"). Strategic planning and success demand fair and open accountability, inclusive collaboration, and a safe/caring work environment. Cliques, alliances, and favoritism will derail this process and push an organization down the path of divisiveness, decay and destruction.

**Complex Adaptive Systems, Quantum Physics, and Self-organizing Systems.** In Figure 5.3, the common themes that emerged from this study regarding the role of complex adaptive systems theory, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems theory are outlined. It is important to note that no significant differences were found among the participants in relation to this research question.

Complex Adaptive Systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Networking</li> <li>▪ Empowerment</li> <li>▪ Systems thinking</li> </ul>
Quantum Physics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interrelatedness</li> <li>▪ Perception</li> <li>▪ Willpower</li> </ul>
Self-organizing Systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Necessity of Change</li> <li>▪ Apparent Chaos</li> <li>▪ Flexibility</li> </ul>

**Figure 5.3: How can the theories of complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems help to explain, understand, and interpret these experiences?**

According to complex adaptive systems theory, leaders within an organization are encouraged to serve as catalysts, or tags, who consistently push the organization to the edge of chaos, which is where true change and transformation can happen. In that zone of complexity, organizational identity and social movements can serve as mediating variables between leadership and organizational emergence. Leadership might come to affect other variables as well, in the iterative interactions of variables which characterize dynamic systems (Schneider & Somers, 2006). The more traditional role of leadership as an independent director and dictator of events has evolved into a model in which leadership affects change and transformation in an indirect and often uncertain fashion. In this exploratory study, I identified the common themes of networking, empowerment, and systems thinking as crucial for success.

Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey (2007) have taken this idea even further. They talk about Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) as a new model to describe the true complexity of the continuous and unpredictable interactions that take place in organizational systems where leadership serves as catalysts (tags) for change, growth and adaptation:

Under conditions of knowledge production, managers should *enable*, rather than suppress or align, informal network dynamics....This new perspective is grounded in a core proposition: *Much of leadership thinking has failed to recognize that leadership is not merely the influential act of an individual or individuals but rather is embedded in a complex interplay of numerous interacting forces.* (p. 302)

Hence, as the participants in this study observed, leaders must be exceptionally skilled at networking and relationship-building in order to help organizations to succeed in turbulent times. Leaders do not serve merely as directors or dictators; rather, they must strive to empower their staff to think creatively, engage in difficult dialogue, and take action. Only through a systems approach, where the leader is capable of seeing well beyond the immediate concerns, will this occur.

As the data have shown, it is imperative that leaders recognize, appreciate, and utilize the incredible power of interrelated connections, perception, and willpower. This approach to leadership theory refuses to delineate definite conclusions, case studies or exemplary practices, however. Rather, it strongly asserts that every organization has a different and unique reality. We must look internally in our organizations to affect change and bring about improvement. As Wheatley (2006) says, "There are no recipes or formulas, no checklists or expert advice that describes reality. If context is as crucial as the science explains, then nothing really transfers; everything is always new and different and unique to each of us"

(p. 9). As stated previously, this is a key reason why I opted to use the qualitative method of phenomenology in this exploratory study.

The central point, then, regarding the implications from self-organizing systems theory on my research, is that change is an absolute necessity in order for any organization to survive, grow, and thrive. Change, though apparently chaotic at times, can help transform organizations into new and wonderful entities, stronger and better than before. As Wheatley (2006) suggests, this has led to a new appreciation of the relationship between order and chaos. The two forces are now understood as mirror images: two states that contain the other. A system can descend into chaos and unpredictability, yet within that state of chaos the system is held within boundaries that are well-ordered and predictable. Without the partnering of these two great forces, no change or progress is possible.

## **Contributions**

**Implications for practice.** One implication of this study would be that while leaders are generally well-schooled on how to “run” organizations with a focus on power, authority, policies, procedures, and business models, perhaps leaders need additional resources, tools, and instruction on how to develop organizations with an increased focus on the following:

- Empowering people
- Encouraging creativity
- Fostering collaboration
- Rewarding risk taking

These suggestions would provide current and future leaders with the vital information, skills, and abilities needed to more effectively guide their organizations. Each of the recommendations above is critical in order for an organization to develop and sustain a

culture that will not only be better prepared to survive turbulent times but also be able to grow and flourish during the relatively calm periods.

As Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey (2007) point out in their discussions about Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), a more appropriate model to describe the true complexity of the continuous and unpredictable interactions that take place in organizational systems is where leaders serve as catalysts (tags) for change, growth and adaptation:

We address this challenge by developing a model of leadership grounded not in bureaucracy, but in complexity. This model focuses on leadership in contexts of dynamically changing networks of informally interacting agents....the premise of complexity leadership is simple: Under conditions of knowledge production, managers should *enable*, rather than suppress or align, informal network dynamics.

(p. 302)

The key is for leaders to serve as *enablers* within the organizational system. This includes empowering employees to make decisions and take action, encouraging staff to come up with new and creative ways of doing things, fostering collaboration among employees and between departments or outside entities, and rewarding folks when their carefully calculated risks pay off.

Slater (2008) stresses the critical need for leaders to use communication strategies and skills in order to “foster the empowerment” of other members of the organization by using collaborative techniques. I would agree that it is the true role of a leader to “build human capacity and self-knowledge in order to develop human potential” (p. 55). In so doing, the leader becomes the change agent and catalyst needed to spur growth and creativity. This is a very different approach, indeed, than the more traditional authority-based models of

leadership exemplified by most organizational charts. As Bolman & Deal (2006) illustrate in their work, leaders are actors in a starring role in their organizational systems. Those systems are complex and ever-changing. In order to be successful, leaders must be quick to adapt and eager to enable others to act. I would argue that we need more warriors and wizards, and fewer bureaucrats or caretakers.

Another implication would be the need for leaders to fully appreciate the importance of *developing others*. While much has been said, studied, and written about leadership development, the skill of developing one's staff is sadly absent or underrepresented. Mastering this competency will pay significant dividends to any leader who is willing to invest in the process, not only for the employees and organization but also for the leader herself. Such an endeavor will require substantial investments of time, resources, and spirit. Once again, the leader must serve as the catalyst to bring these three forces together in a way that empowers and enables employees to develop their professional and personal skills.

In *FYI: For Your Improvement*, by Lombardo & Eichinger (2006), the criticality of investing time, resources, and spirit into the vital task of developing others is expressed as follows:

Development and preparation is a three-part harmony. The person needs to be ambitious and willing to do what's required to grow and progress. The organization has to have a process in place to help those who want to grow. Those two are usually true in all organizations. The last part of the harmony is usually the problem: The boss has to be an active player in the three-part harmony or development won't happen. Without the boss's time, interest and effort, people will not grow much. People can't develop themselves without help. People won't grow if they don't want

to. People won't grow if the organization shows no interest and offers no support.

People won't grow if you don't make it a priority. (p. 114)

Yet, this is apparently where many leaders and organizations fail. They are so focused on the traditional "school of business" theories and principles, that they neglect their most valuable asset – their staff.

A final implication focuses on the suggestion that, in order to be successful, a leader must also possess *managerial courage*. As Lombardo & Eichinger (2006) point out, this particular leadership competency includes a variety of skills and tactics including:

- Stepping up to conflict and seeing them as opportunities
- Reading situations quickly
- Being good at focused listening
- Being able to hammer out tough agreements and settle disputes equitably
- Finding common ground and getting cooperation with minimum noise

A leader who exhibits managerial courage does not avoid conflict, but rather sees debate as an opportunity for growth. From this perspective, the more competing and creative ideas that are on the table, the better. Open debate and discussion is welcomed and encouraged.

I would suggest that current and future leaders need to add conflict resolution skills to their toolbox. Such training will help leaders to become more adept at exerting managerial courage when called upon to do so. In today's complex world, ethical dilemmas and competing interests permeate the workplace. Only through open and honest dialogue will leaders be able to assess, address, and resolve the myriad of complex situations that await them in their organizations. Managerial courage can no longer be relegated to the category "other duties assigned as necessary" on the leader's job description. An effective leader



must be able and willing to have those difficult conversations with their employees, colleagues, and superiors. The cost of not doing so is simply too high.

**Significance of the study.** This study provides insight into the role leaders play in helping organizations to succeed in turbulent time. The findings provide current and future leaders with some suggestions on how to achieve and sustain such success, based on the individual and universal experiences of the participants as well as the current literature on leadership, complex adaptive systems, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems.

One significant insight that emerged from this study is the vital role that *reflection* plays in the experiences of effective leaders. Critical reflection is important as a means for identifying and questioning assumptions, which opens the door for leaders and organizations to learn from experience and history. Only through this process can a leader pause and ponder who they are, where they are going, and what they need to do to get there. As Chapman and Anderson (2005) suggest:

An experienced reflective practitioner establishes a clearly articulated goal for the reflective practice, makes disciplined use of a personally satisfying method for reflection selected from the many varieties available, regularly assesses what they learn from their reflections, and, above all, makes a commitment to make changes to their practice, professionally and personally, based upon that learning. (p. 542)

Reflection provides an opportunity for a leader to step back and consider all viewpoints, options, and consequences. Through the reflective process, effective leaders can assess the current status of their own learning process, their staff, and their organization in comparison to where each should be moving toward. Gaps and opportunities, strengths and weaknesses, needs and resources can all be identified and evaluated through reflection.

In relation to the leadership quality of reflection, another important insight is that embedded in the reflective process is a sense of *humility* on the part of the leader. Each participant in our study indicated that a primary reason to pause and reflect was an intrinsic acknowledgement that they did not have all the answers. In *Gandhi, CEO: 14 Principles to Guide and Inspire Modern Leaders*, Axelrod (2010) writes:

Effective managers use whatever works for them. *Exceptionally* effective managers absorb what they find, making it their own. Instead of merely lifting, exploiting, and discarding an idea you encounter, try revolving it in your mind, so that you might examine it from every angle in search of more applications. A given idea may not be original with you, but if you create original applications for it, you can bring something new and powerful into the world. (p. 74)

Reflection provides an opportunity to peacefully arrive at the realization that one does not have all the answers and cannot succeed alone. Through reflection a leader can learn not only from her own life experiences but also from those of her staff, colleagues, and the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of her predecessors. Through ongoing reflection, each participant in this study came to see that their positive and welcoming view of change is what will ground them and sustain them, come what may – beyond their degrees, salaries, and titles. This realization is most refreshing, indeed.

An additional contribution is the focus on a system-oriented perspective that effective leaders must maintain. Jim Collins (2001), in his book *Good to Great* which chronicles his extensive study of twenty-eight Fortune 500 companies and their leadership, illustrates the importance of being a *global thinker* in a remarkable way. He compares global thinkers and those who are more short-sighted with the hedgehog and the fox:

Foxes pursue many ends at the same time and see the world in all its complexity. They are scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, never integrating their thinking into one overall concept or unifying vision. Hedgehogs, on the other hand, simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything. Freud and the unconscious, Darwin and natural selection, Marx and class struggle, Einstein and relativity, Adam Smith and division of labor – they were all hedgehogs...No, hedgehogs aren't simpletons; they have a piercing insight that allows them to see through complexity and discern underlying patterns. Hedgehogs see what is essential, and ignore the rest. (p. 91)

The truly great leaders, who Collins refers to as “Level 5 Leaders,” are able to look at the big picture with all its apparent complexity and focus in on what is most important. These leaders are not deterred or derailed by relatively minor bumps in the road; rather, they never lose sight of their purpose, goal, and mission. In common business jargon – they have a vision that is elegant, easy to articulate, and unwavering. They are truly global thinkers.

The final contribution is the proposition that not every leader is equally capable of seeing the interrelatedness of existence, or the power of perception, or the incredible possibilities of willpower. I would suggest that, as a result, each and every organization or system is unique due to the varied levels of leadership ability. Quantum physics theory would agree, which is precisely why it is vital that leaders view each situation and dilemma differently. As Stacey (1996) states:

We can see a direct causal link between being at the edge of chaos, engaging in the messy self-organizing processes of creative destruction, and competitive survival. What cannot be postulated, however, is a link between a particular kind of overall

decision-making process and a successful outcome, because such links get lost. All we can say is that when a system operates at the edge, it is capable of creative and innovative behavior. We cannot say exactly what processes this requires, nor can we claim that being at the edge guarantees success, because it all depends on what the other systems the organization is interacting with are doing. (p. 251)

Such a proposition in terms of organizational learning theory would support the concepts held up by quantum physics theory as discussed here. Organizations are complex systems, and leaders must learn how to navigate those systems based on a complex view of the universe as a series of interrelated systems.

Apparent or occasional chaos, then, is a necessary ingredient for the new creative ordering of any open system. Leaders must recognize this phenomenon and be flexible if they are to be successful. Perhaps it is only fitting to recall the teachings of Gandhi when discussing the implications of complex adaptive systems theory, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems theory for leaders striving to help organizations to succeed in turbulent times. As Axelrod (2010) wrote in *Gandhi, CEO: 14 Principles to Guide and Inspire Modern Leaders*:

No enterprise ever simply arrives at its goal as a ship arrives at its dock. The idea of ‘maintaining’ an organization’s status is an illusion. It cannot be done. There is, as Gandhi explained, always movement, always change. The great leadership issue, therefore, is one of navigation: the creation of purposeful, productive movement within an environment of movement. This requires continual vigilance and planning as well as a high level of energy. Gandhi embraced these requirements of leadership, from which, in any case, he saw no escape. ‘Happiest are those that plunge in the

fire,' he wrote, citing the words of a traditional Indian poet. 'The lookers-on are all but scorched by flames.' Either enter the fray, thrusting and parrying, or stand still and be consumed. (p. 86)

Wise words from a systems-thinker long since departed from this world. Leaders today would do well to listen to these profound words.

**Limitations and reflections on methodology.** When discussing the results of her research, Charmaz (2004) cautioned the conference attendees not to underestimate the role of the researcher in qualitative studies. She suggested that, "No one talks of how we (the researchers) may be transformed" (p. 991). Having now presented the findings, results, and implications of this study, I will now discuss the limitations of my research along with some personal reflections on the research process itself.

The primary limitation of this exploratory study's results is in the population used in the study. The participants included in the study were not randomly selected. As such, they are not a truly representative sample of leaders who served during times of turmoil and change in an organization. Nevertheless, purposeful sampling is a common practice in qualitative research. Such an approach is often warranted when the researcher is looking for a specific type of individual with a certain kind of experience as indicated in this study. This targeted group of participants is not likely to emerge from a random sample (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

All participants in this study were contacted twice with invitations to participate. The first contact was via telephone approximately one month before the interview process was scheduled to begin, and then again via email two weeks later. All of those individuals who were invited agreed to participate soon after the second contact. There is a possibility that the

participants initially had varying understandings about the premise and objective of the study due to my relationships and prior conversations with them. However, once the Consent to Participate document was distributed to the participants, reviewed, and discussed individually, I believe that everyone had a full and equal understanding of the purpose and process of the study. Despite the small sample size, this exploratory study provided significant and unique insight into the roles leaders play in helping organizations to navigate through periods of change and turmoil. A larger sample representing a greater variety of industries, organizations, and experiences may have generated a wider array of observations, or even different interpretations of those experiences. Regardless, I believe that this study achieved its objective of contributing to and furthering the quest for a better understanding of the role of leaders in organizations, especially during periods of apparent chaos.

Given my own previous life experiences and philosophical beliefs, I have personal opinions and feelings that may have affected my research on how leadership can successfully help organizations survive in turbulent times. I have significant personal experience with leaders and organizations that have both flourished in difficult times as well as those who have failed miserably. I feel that valuable insights were gleaned from both. While these personal experiences inevitably influenced the interpretation of the data collected, I continually strived to recognize issues of differing worldviews, as well as my own personal relationship with each of the participants. Moreover, the triangulation of data collection through the collection of artifacts has substantiated the information provided by the participants in the interviews, as well as observations from third-party individuals.

Due to the variety of professional experiences and educational expertise that I brought to this study, I was acutely aware of those experiences that were new to me and always

remained intensely curious when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. This previous knowledge and experience provided me with added insight when asking probing or follow-up questions in order to develop a rich and accurate description of the universal experiences of the participants. My openness to acknowledge these potential biases and to continuously question myself throughout the research process helped ensure a fair and honest collection and presentation of the data. Finally, the study was regularly reviewed by members of my dissertation committee, as well as an extensive independent review of the composite analysis by a qualified third-party.

**Suggestions for future research.** I recommend further qualitative research with a larger sample of participants representing a wider diversity of industries and change events. If possible, it would be most informative to include participants from outside the United States or multinational organizations. In so doing, the researcher may find that there are cultural influences that affect the role of leaders depending on their geographical location. Since the methodology utilized in this exploratory study was outlined in great detail, I would suggest that it could be easily duplicated. The research plan outlined in chapter three could act as a guideline for future research.

Specific areas that are ripe for further investigation that would build upon the results of this study include the central findings listed as follows:

- The importance of *enabling* employees through empowerment, encouraging creativity, collaboration, and rewarding risk-taking
- The value of *developing others* for leaders and organizations
- The increasing need for leaders to exercise *managerial courage* in the workplace

- The central role of *reflection* as leaders strive to understand and adapt to rapidly changing organizational systems and more complex interactions between systems
- The growing emphasis on *global thinking* as leaders are called upon to recognize and manipulate the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all systems
- A greater understanding and appreciation of the tremendous creative potential that apparent *chaos* can have on organizational systems

Some potential questions to be explored might include:

- Why/When is it most appropriate and desirable for leaders to empower/enable their staff, and when is it not appropriate? How can a leader recognize the difference? What are the limits regarding empowerment, creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking? What does empowerment look like?
- How does a leader go about securing cooperation from their superiors and staff to set up employee development opportunities and programs? What do these programs look like? What incentives/rewards are there for participation in employee development plans? How can these programs assist in succession planning?
- What specific skills are recommended for leaders in order to encourage increased demonstrations of managerial courage in the workplace? How does a leader know when it is appropriate to initiate difficult conversations? What are the differences, if any, among how a leader demonstrates managerial courage with their employees, colleagues, and superiors? When should a leader take on the role of the “warrior”?
- How does a leader go about constructing a healthy work-life balance that allows for and encourages time for reflection? What role does the practice of humility play



when engaging in critical reflection? How do leaders translate the valuable insight gained through reflection into actionable goals and objectives?

- What can a current or future leader do to further develop his/her ability and skill at global, systems-thinking? What are the differences between acting in a directing versus a catalyst role? What influence can willpower, attitude, and worldview have on a leader's effectiveness, especially during periods of turmoil?
- How can a leader take advantage of apparent chaos in order to encourage creative self-organization in an organizational system? How can a leader tell the difference between healthy, self-organizing chaos and destructive, degenerative chaos? What can a leader do to maintain morale and productivity during periods of significant change or chaos?

As outlined above, the findings of this exploratory study provide significant potential for future research. An equal number of males and females participated in this study, ranging in age from the 34 to the 67. It might be interesting to study differences in terms of gender, generation, cultural background, and nationality. In order to better understand whether these skills are innate or learned, a study which took into account different levels of formal education on leadership would provide insight on the extent to which these studies have impacted a leader's effectiveness. Finally, as indicated above, a study that incorporated participants from outside the United States would help to distinguish any differences based on culture or geographic location.

As the findings reported here were compiled from a study of six participants in three industries and from a common geographic location (the Southwestern United States), they should not be generalized. However, the findings from this study did provide a

comprehensive individual and composite analysis of the personal and universal experiences of the participants. As such, these results may have additional universal applications in other, similar organizational systems. While a quantitative methodological approach may have resulted in more generalizable findings, the qualitative method used in this study allowed for a rich, contextual description and understanding of the universal experiences of the participants. For the purposes of this study, aimed at understanding how leaders help organizations to succeed in turbulent times, the colorful, living picture painted by this composite analysis is truly priceless.

### **Conclusion**

As continually demonstrated throughout this study, “Much of leadership thinking has failed to recognize that leadership is not merely the influential act of an individual or individuals but rather is embedded in a complex interplay of numerous interacting forces” (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007, p. 302). Each of the participants in this study, whether individually or collectively, stressed the ultimate importance of a leader’s ability to understand this complex interplay of forces in order to operate effectively, especially during turbulent times. The primary findings reported above do not focus on the more traditional “business administration” competencies most leaders have been exposed to in their studies. Rather, these findings all revolve around the idea that effective leaders must be comfortable and skilled in certain non-traditional, softer, intrinsic abilities. Unfortunately, very few current leaders had the advantage of such instruction and were forced to learn these skills on the job and on their own.

Oftentimes, leaders are not adequately prepared to recognize and address the increasingly complex interplay of systems that they face in their organizations. As described

in this exploratory study, leaders must become skilled in enabling and empowering others in the organization through the encouragement of creativity, the fostering of collaboration, and the rewarding of risk-taking. The value of developing direct reports and the importance of exercising managerial courage cannot be underestimated. Leaders today must appreciate and practice critical reflection and global, systems-thinking as they attempt to navigate the choppy waters of rapid change and embrace the possibilities that await them on the edge of chaos. Finally, effective leaders need not fear the inevitability of change or apparent chaos; rather, they should learn to embrace such times as opportunities for creative self-organization and new birth for themselves, their staff, and their organizational system.

Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, I was able to arrive at a composite description of the universal experiences of the participants. The participants' own words and stories helped to inform and illuminate the reported findings, as well as the implications for practice and the significance of the study overall. This study warrants further investigation of the role that the more non-traditional leadership skills discussed above might play as leaders strive to help organizations succeed in turbulent times.

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