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Participant Reactions to a Leadership Development Program in a High Growth Firm: A Preliminary Study

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PARTICIPANT REACTIONS TO A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

PROGRAM IN A HIGH GROWTH FIRM: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Abstract

High growth firms (HGF), which report more than 20% annual growth for at least 3 consecutive years, have limited time and resources to support their success. Transformative leadership development interventions, which strive to create marked changes through shifting leaders' ways of perceiving and operating, may be highly effective for rapidly expanding the firms' leadership capacities. This study examined the perceived nature and impacts of a leadership development program that was intended to be transformative in one HGF.

All 10 leadership development trainees were interviewed about the effects of the program and the program features that contributed to those effects. Participants reported enjoying the program and needing to commit to the process to see results. Unanimously reported program effects included personal transformative change and improved cross-organizational alignment and collaboration. Eight participants also reported organizational growth and change, and seven reported knowledge and skill development. Participants generally agreed the program was transformative, specifically due to tools and resources that challenged their mental models, shared learning exercises, and interactive activities and dialogue.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

High growth firms (HGFs) are enterprises that have at least 10 employees and US$100,000 at baseline and reports more than 20% annual growth for the next three years, where growth is measured as increased headcount or revenue (Eurostat-OECD, 2007). Gazelles are HGFs that achieved its HGF status within 5 years of firm creation (Garnsey & Heffernan, 2005).

Given that HGFs have limited time and resources for success (Geroski, 1995; Jovanovic, 1982), structured leadership development interventions—particularly those that foster individual reflection and interpersonal sharing may be highly effective for rapidly expanding their leadership capacities (Avolio et al., 2010; Day et al., 2014; Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 2017; Solansky, 2010). Such leadership programs reflect concepts of transformative learning, wherein the leaders would engage in deep reflection and revision of their ways of perceiving, understanding, and responding to their environments (Johnson, 2008; Reuber & Fischer, 1999). Some researchers have argued that transformative rather than traditional learning is needed because scripted informational education experiences cannot adequately reflect the complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, and urgency of the real-world challenges faced by HGF leadership teams. This study will examine the impacts of a leadership development program in one HGF.

Study Purpose

This study examined a leadership development program within one HGF. The research question was: What are trainee perceptions of the impact of the leadership development program? The study objectives were:

1. Identify the effects of the leadership development program reported by participants.

2. Identify which program elements participants believed contributed to their transformative learning.

Significance of the Study

HGFs face considerable challenges they must overcome in a very short period. The high rate of business failure and the small number of companies that have successfully achieved HGF status suggest that few entrepreneurs and their organizations have figured out how to overcome these challenges and navigate a pathway to success. Every business failure represents lost resources, lost products and services the company could have provided, and potentially damaged careers. Identifying how leaders of HGFs can be supported in improving their firms' performance and business success is critical. While examination of existing theory and research suggest that leadership development may provide transformative experiences to enhance entrepreneurs' success, this proposition requires examination, particularly with regard to HGFs. This study produced exploratory insights regarding the extent to which participants experienced the program as transformative, what elements they found transformative, and what impact the program had. These initial insights will provide important feedback to the company, program designers, and others wanting to enhance the developmental and performance impacts of training and development. As a result, improved program designs can be created and facilitation of the program can be adapted to optimize its effects on participants and their organizations. The findings from this study additionally can provide some evidence regarding the participant perceptions of leadership development intended to be transformative within HGFs.

Definitions

High-growth firm (HGF): an enterprise that (a) has at least 10 employees in the baseline year and (b) reports more than 20% annual growth for the next three years, where growth is

measured as increased headcount or revenue (Eurostat-OECD, 2007). HGFs usually employ fewer than 250 personnel, have assets below $43 million, and often have a baseline year revenue of at least $100,000 (Valenteová et al., 2018).

Gazelle: an HGF that achieved its HGF status within 5 years of the firm's founding (Garnsey & Heffernan, 2005).

Leadership development: developing an organization's collective leadership strength (Day et al., 2014) through formal, intentional training intended to improve leaders' effectiveness and skillsets (Avolio et al., 2010; Solansky, 2010) consistent with the development needs of the organization and its leaders (Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 2017).

Transformative learning: dramatic change in one's cognitive representations of reality that culminates in new and different ways of perceiving and understanding one's internal experience and external environment (Johnson, 2008; Nemec, 2012).

Transformative leadership development: formal, intentional training intended to improve the organization's leadership capacity (Avolio et al., 2010; Day et al., 2014; Solansky, 2010) by achieving shifts in trainees' mental models and ways of perceiving and understanding themselves, their organizations, and their environments (Johnson, 2008; Nemec, 2012).

Organization of the Study

This chapter outlined the background of the study, articulated the study purpose, and described the study setting. The significance of the study also was provided.

Chapter 2 offers a review of relevant literature. Literature on HGFs is presented first, followed by a discussion of theory and research related to transformative leadership development.

Chapter 3 describes the methods that will be used in this study. Topics in this chapter include the research design and research setting, procedures for recruiting participants, ethical considerations, data sources, data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter 4 reports the study findings. Key themes emerging from the archival and interview data will be reported.

Chapter 5 offers a summary and discussion of the findings. Specifically, conclusions related to each research question are outlined, recommendations for the study organization and organization development practitioners are offered, and limitations are acknowledged. Suggestions for continued research are presented.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This study examined a leadership development program within one HGF. The research question was: What are trainee perceptions of the impact of the leadership development program? The study objectives were:

1. Identify the effects of the leadership development program reported by participants.

2. Identify which program elements participants believed contributed to their transformative learning.

This chapter reviews literature relevant to the study purpose. The following sections discuss research about HGFs and transformative leadership development. The chapter closes with a summary.

High Growth Firms

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, a high-growth firm (HGF) is an enterprise that (a) has at least 10 employees at baseline and (b) reports more than 20% annual growth for the next three years, where growth is measured as increased headcount or revenue (Eurostat-OECD, 2007). Other researchers have noted that this definition is considered authoritative (Ahmad & Gonnard, 2007; Moreno & Casillas, 2007; Daunfeldt et al., 2010). Gazelles are a special type of HGF that achieved its HGF status within 5 years of firm creation (Garnsey & Heffernan, 2005). HGFs usually employ fewer than 250 personnel, have assets below $43 million, and often have a baseline year revenue of at least $100,000 (Birch et al., 1995).

While most enterprises (termed routine or small businesses) tend to focus on starting and staying small (Haltiwanger et al., 2010), HGFs embrace innovation and growth and are found in most economic sectors and industries (Clayton et al., 2013; Davidsson & Henrekson, 2002; Woodward et al., 2011). Thus, according to Morris et al.'s (2015) taxonomy of startups, HGFs, which vary based on their emphasis on growth, innovation, and reinvestment in the business. would be classified as an aggressive/high-growth venture, which have strong, innovative capacities with a national or international market focus. This differs from their other three classifications of: (a) survival businesses, which live month-to-month and are necessity-driven; (b) lifestyle businesses, which are more stable and provide modest reinvestment in the firm but generally remain as sole proprietorships; and (c) managed-growth ventures, which exhibit steady growth over time with the periodic introduction of new products, continual reinvestment, and consistent business development. The following sections describe the founding conditions, impacts, and outcomes of HGFs.

Founding Conditions

Founding conditions refer to the set of internal and external conditions that exist at the time of the firm's creation and affect the firm's survivability (Geroski et al., 2010) and growth potential (Bamford et al., 2000). Examination of the research indicates that three internal factors that can position HGFs to achieve their unique level of performance: entrepreneurial mindset, firm-based strategic resources, and the firm's structural characteristics. Entrepreneurial mindset concerns the founder's characteristics (e.g., age, gender, immigration status), need for achievement and control, and the entrepreneurial process. Various researchers have proposed that high-growth entrepreneurs possess certain unique qualities that explain their success, such as need for achievement (Brockhaus & Horwitz, 1986; McClelland, 1961), locus of control,

propensity for taking risks, problem solving and innovative skills, and values), previous experiences (i.e., prior job dissatisfaction and role models), personal demographic characteristics (Brockhaus & Horwitz, 1986), preference for autonomy (Hurst & Pugsley, 2011; Sexton & Bowman, 1985), access to large networks to leverage for information (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986), and personal wealth (Parker, 2009). Other research has shown a strong connection between entrepreneurs' mindsets (e.g., high risk tolerance, propensity to set aggressive goals) and achieving HGF status (Boston & Boston, 2007; Siegel et al., 1993).

Entrepreneurial process involves activities such as playing the role of information manager; strategically managing gatekeepers (Casson, 2005); discovering and developing business ideas (Alvarez & Barney, 2007); and navigating the creation and development of firms (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Barney, 1991; Busenitz & Barney, 1997). Moreover, differences between the entrepreneurial process and outcomes of novice versus serial entrepreneurs have been noted (Barney et al., 2001) because as entrepreneurs learn, they lower their chance of exit and gain competitive advantages as their knowledge creation and decision-making capacities evolve (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Jovanovic, 1982).

The second driver in HGF achievement concerns firm-based strategic resources, including human capital, physical capital and financing, and organizational and social capital (Piazza, 2018). Knowledge and human capital are strategic resources that enhance and foster the probability of success in high-growth firms (Siegel et al., 1993). Critical sources of capital begin with the experience and expertise the entrepreneur brings to the venture as well as through that of key personnel. Physical capital and financing can be challenging for entrepreneurs to access because of the perceived risks that potential investors associate with new ventures (Keuschnigga & Nielsen, 2002). Because young firms are often resource-constrained, they tend to access

resources through strategic alliances so they can rise to emergent opportunities as well as create and capture value (Mohr & Garnsey, 2011). Such alliances also reflect the firm's social and organizational capital and can be important sources of competitive advantage (Malecki, 2012). Malecki elaborated that social capital "embodies how people function productively with other people, primarily locally but also at a distance" (p. 1033).

The third driver of HGF performance concerns the firm's structural characteristics, such as its age, size, and location (Piazza, 2018). Although more updated research is needed, past studies have indicated that new firms must prove their viability in short periods of time (Argwal, 1998; Geroski, 1995). Younger firms have a significant survival need for growth; however, small entrants generally have a higher mortality rate than their larger counterparts (Agarwal & Audretsch, 2001). While small firms can have equal or better survival rates in the case of mature stages of the product life cycle and in technologically intensive products (Argwal, 1998; Agarwal & Audretsch, 2001), successful entry generally may be less about radical innovation and possibly more about filling strategic niches, thus negating the impact of entry size on the likelihood of survival. Nonetheless, Argwal (1998) concluded that technological activity affects the nature and rate of firm failure, suggesting that the relationships between technological activity, age and small firm survival may be complex. Jovanovic (1982) added that firms that achieve efficiency tend to have a higher survival rate. Local levels of skilled labor, suppliers, and purchasers also have a beneficial influence, while local competition has a detrimental influence on startup survival, these relationships are moderated by heterogeneity in firms' resources and capabilities (Pe'er & Keil, 2013).

Favorable external founding conditions also can position firms for successful growth and achievement of HGF status (Shane, 2009). Although the possible range of conditions is vast

(Baum et al., 2001; Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1990), examination of past literature emphasizes the impact of regional economic climate, early access to funding, and intergenerational learning between parent and offspring firms (Pugliese et al., 2016).

Regional competitive assets as well as economic and regulatory conditions also contribute to HGF performance (Piazza, 2018). Policies created to foster science and innovation typically endeavor to both facilitate the creation of new goods and services and counteract market failures that inhibit innovation and knowledge transfer (Bartik, 1990). It follows that economic policies that promote rather than inhibit knowledge spillover would be associated with greater likelihood of HGFs. For example, Haltiwanger (2011) speculated that Europe's strict regulatory environment may explain the smaller number of HGFs in Europe compared to the United States (Bravo-Biosca, 2010). Moreover, firms tend to co-locate in clusters based on opportunity. The increase in activity produces knowledge spillovers that benefit new and existing firms alike (Audretsch & Mahmood, 1995), increasing competition and overall innovative activity—both at the beginning and declining stages of the product lifecycle (Audretsch & Feldman, 1996; Porter, 2000).

To support early expansion, firms may seek to attract investment by venture capitalists (Gompers & Lerner, 2001; Wright, 1998). Venture capitalists offer firms early access to funding, in addition to advice and managerial talent. Research on venture capital shows that firms with venture capital involvement pursue more aggressive growth targets—partly to fulfill the return requirements of venture capital investors (Wright, 1998). Thus, venture capital involvement has been associated with firm growth (Bjuggren et al., 2010; Davila et al., 2003). In Mohr and Garnsey's (2011) examination of Cambridge-area technology firms, HGFs received substantial support from venture capital investors, with HGFs being four times more likely than other firms

to attract this type of funding (35% v. 8%). Moreover, 17 of the HGFs that received venture capital achieved sales prices nine times higher than their total venture capital investment.

Consistent with the benefits of knowledge spillover discussed in earlier sections, intergenerational learning from prior experience in a parent organization can create accumulated knowledge that benefits the creation, management, and growth of new firms (Garnsey & Heffernan, 2005; Garnsey et al., 2008; Mason & Harrison, 2006). For example, various researchers have proposed that serial entrepreneurs can help strengthen a firm's managerial abilities through the experience and expertise they bring related to managing and growing the enterprise, accessing funding, and utilizing accumulated knowledge, alliances, and other resources (Garnsey & Heffernan, 2005; Gompers et al., 2010; Mason & Brown, 2010; Mason & Harrison, 2006). Moreover, when the new venture is the result of a spin-off incubated within a parent enterprise or institution, the pre-established resource base provides particularly powerful growth advantages (Clarysse et al., 2005; Djokovic & Souitaris, 2008; Garnsey et al., 2008; Klepper, 2007; Shane, 2004).

At the same time, Kihlstrom and Laffont (1979), critics of the theory of intergenerational benefits, suggest that serial entrepreneurs are not more likely to produce HGFs because entrepreneurial performance is largely due to chance and rarely is sustained. Mohr and Garnsey's (2011) study of Cambridge-area technology firms indicated that HGFs were more likely than other firms to have been founded by serial entrepreneurs. Moreover, HGFs were more likely to be started as spin-offs than non-HGFs. Mohr and Garnsey further reasoned that this may partially explain the disproportionate share of HGFs in patenting activity, as new patentable technologies are more commonly developed in university labs than in small and medium enterprises. Based on

their findings, the researchers concluded that Cambridge-area HGFs benefited from intergenerational effects, consistent with Garnsey and Heffernan (2005) and Garnsey et al. (2008).

By virtue of their size and youth, new entrants typically face substantial limits to their productive and performance capacities. Non-organic growth modes refer to activities that enable these firms to overcome the liabilities of newness and smallness in order to access resources, capabilities, and opportunities usually reserved for larger firms. Non-organic firm growth can be classified as acquisition types and hybrid types, such as licensing, alliances, and spin-offs, which are frequently used by HGFs (McKelvie & Wiklund, 2010; Mohr & Garnsey, 2010; Pasanen, 2007). Two additional modes of non-organic growth that have not been as well examined include strategic alliances and international operations, which aid HGFs in leveraging their productive base better, to exploit opportunities, and potentially broaden their set of opportunities for growth (McKelvie & Wiklund, 2010). In Mohr and Garnsey's (2011) study of Cambridge-area technology firms, HGFs were slightly more likely to form more alliances and to form them sooner than other firms.

Additionally, high-technology firms have an extensive practice of growth through internationalization (Burgel et al., 2001; Coeurduroy & Murray, 2008; Davidsson et al., 2006; Licht et al., 2008)—not only to achieve labor market efficiencies but also to access demand for their products beyond their local markets (Rialp-Crado et al., 2002). Mohr and Garnsey's (2011) results indicate that HGFs drew more overseas revenue than did other firms, indicating a stronger international orientation.

These collected findings indicate that firms face improved odds of achieving HGF status if they operate within a business-supportive regional environment, have early access to funding, leverage intergenerational learning (e.g., through founding by a serial entrepreneur), achieve

scale through strategic alliances, and access increased market demand through internationalization. Mohr and Garnsey (2011) further argued that of these various preconditions, the most powerful factor is having international operations (thereby, generating international revenues). The second most powerful factor in their study was receiving venture capital, followed by forming strategic alliances.

Impacts and Outcomes

The economic importance of rapidly growing young firms was initially highlighted by Gibrat (1931). Later studies have further elaborated on the manner and impact of rapidly growing firms across a variety of national contexts and industries (Autio et al., 2000; Halabisky et al., 2006; Yudanov, 2010). Young, rapidly growing firms tend to concentrate in certain localities and contribute to regional innovation, regional economic performance (i.e., per capita income, productivity, employment, and gross regional product), and job creation (Acs & Mueller, 2008; Frederick, 2004; Julien, 2007; Mason & Brown, 2010; Mason et al., 2009; Frederick, 2004; Stam, 2005). Plehn-Dujowich (2013) found that young firms are more innovative per dollar spent on research and development than are older firms. Muller's (2007) study revealed that existing firms do not fully take advantage of new knowledge and that start-ups are more effective at capturing innovations derived from new knowledge. This dynamic is reflected in the concept of *entrepreneurial absorptive capacity,* which refers to entrepreneurs' ability to understand new knowledge, appreciate its value, and take advantage of it by starting a business (Qian & Acs, 2013). Absorptive capacity is an essential element within a region's entrepreneurial system (Qian et al., 2013).

HGFs benefit regional economic performance in several ways. One way is through individual knowledge accumulation (Romer, 1990) and knowledge spillover occurring between

firms, within specialized industries, between urban citizens and businesses, and from entrepreneurs exiting existing jobs and forming new firms (Acs et al., 2009; Glaeser et al., 1991). Mason et al. (2009) additionally found that HGFs, which tend to be more productive than more traditional businesses, influence economies through "aggregate productivity growth which occurs by displacing weaker firms and speeding up the reallocation of their resources to stronger firms" (p. 28).

In terms of job creation impacts, Mohr and Garnsey's (2011) study of Cambridge-area technology firms indicated that HGFs accounted for nearly 30% of employment within their cluster of high-tech pioneering firms, without ever accounting for more than 10% of the share of firms. Mohr and Garnsey further found that gazelles—those firms that achieved HGF status early in their organizational lifecycle—experienced additional benefits of their early onset achievements, as these firms grew to be bigger than firms that achieved HGF status later on in their lifetimes.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that most firms, including HGFs, encounter growth setbacks (Mohr & Garnsey, 2011). Rapid growth itself may overstretch the firm's resources, leading to setbacks. These create disincentives limiting the number of firms that aim for growth. However, in most cases, early rapid growth also carries sufficient advantages to override such considerations (Piazza, 2018).

This section discussed the definition, founding conditions, and impacts and outcomes of HGFs. The next section discusses transformative leadership development and considers its applications within HGFs.

Transformative Leadership Development

Transformative learning refers to dramatic change, where the learner achieves a shift in perspective (Nemec, 2012). Johnson (2008) added that transformative learning occurs at the level of one's mental models, defined as one's naturally occurring cognitive representations of reality—the way one codifies reality and one's understanding of it. It follows that transformative learning is directed at changing the meaning of structure or the mental model itself, with the outcome of achieving a new and different way of looking at the environment (Johnson, 2008).

Leadership development involves formal, intentional training intended to improve leaders' effectiveness and skillsets (Avolio et al., 2010; Solansky, 2010) consistent with the organization's and leaders' developmental needs (Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 2017). Day et al. (2014) further distinguished leader development from leadership development by defining *leader* development as focusing on the individual and *leadership* development as focusing on building an organization's leadership capacity.

Therefore, transformative leadership development involves formal, intentional training intended to improve the organization's leadership capacity (Avolio et al., 2010; Day et al., 2014; Solansky, 2010) by achieving dramatic shifts in trainees' mental models and ways of perceiving and understanding themselves, their organizations, and their environments (Johnson, 2008; Nemec, 2012).

Process of Transformative Learning

The theory and practice of transformative learning is based on a recognition that growth comes from discomfort. Facilitating change, therefore, requires "leading learners to the edge" by prompting "disruptions" through emotional experiences carefully calculated to "balance, challenge, and comfort" (Taylor & Jarecke, 2009, pp. 283–284). Disruption occurs from a

critical examination of one's own assumptions, values, and beliefs, and of the foundations and expectations of the system in which one operates (Nemec, 2012), which necessitates "lenses that reflect back to us a stark and differently highlighted picture of what we do … [that show] how some of our most deeply held values and beliefs lead us into distorted and constrained ways of being" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 133). In turn, transformative learning requires a separation from one's old ways of knowing, embracing the consequent sense of disequilibrium, and eventually arriving at "a better organized construction of the world" is central to the process of transformative learning (Kegan, 1982, p. 267). Transformation and learning are possible only through an internal process of examining, questioning, revising, and validating of one's perspective (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow adds, "A change in perspective becomes personally emancipating in that one is freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings that have constricted and distorted one's life," (p. 41).

As a pioneer in transformative learning theory, Mezirow (1991) articulated a 10-phase process of adult transformation based on his study of 83 women from 12 college programs. The first phase, a disorienting dilemma, features an "experience that causes a person to question what he or she has previously believed to be unquestionable" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 333). Often, the experience turns out to be a crisis that cannot be resolved by applying previously learned coping strategies and problem-solving skills. Mezirow (1991) explained that this could occur through loss, crisis, or change (e.g., death, illness, retirement); an eye-opening book or experience; or a personal search for meaning or something missing in one's life. Alternately, the individual may seek education and training because of a sense that their current "way to know the world" no longer works. Regardless of the specific event, the resulting sense of disorientation can catapult people into Phase 2, self-examination, which Mezirow (1991) described as a painful experience

of challenging one's deeply held beliefs, values, and sense of self. This phase often is accompanied by feelings of fear, anger, or shame as the person feels their very foundational beliefs and orientations being shaken.

Phase 3, critical assessment of assumptions, occurs when self-examination (Phase 2) prompts the individual to reevaluate his or her basic assumptions, interpretations, and process of making meaning of experiences (Mezirow, 1991). This process enables people to correct both distortions in their beliefs and errors in their problem-solving (Henderson, 2002; Mezirow, 1991). Movement onto successive phases of change requires transformation of these beliefs (Mezirow, 1991).

Phase 4, recognition of shared discontent and transformation, involves realizing that others have had similar disorienting experiences and have undergone a similar process of self-examination and reevaluation (Mezirow, 1991). This recognition can validate and normalize the individual's process of revising his or her perspective. As a result, the change that is underway may be further catalyzed.

Phase 5, exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, involves the person considering and exploring options for forming new roles, relationships, or actions. This phase can further expand the individual's awareness of his or her possibilities and, in turn, help him or her further relinquish the old patterns of thinking and acting.

Learning about other options equips the individual for Phase 6, planning a course of action (Mezirow, 1991). This plan can include setting goals, designing tactics for achieving those goals, and envisioning what success would look like.

Phases 7 through 9 involve carrying out the plan, including acquiring new knowledge and skills, trying out new roles, renegotiating relationships, and building competency and self-

confidence (Mezirow, 1991). These phases are necessary because architecting a new perspective and operating within a renewed vision of reality typically require new patterns of thinking, acting, and relating. Thus, a new internal and external way of operating must be created that aligns with the individual's new concept of reality.

The tenth and final phase, reintegration, occurs when the person has fully incorporated the new attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors into a transformed perspective. Possessing a new reality that results in shifts in one's interpretations and meanings attached to experiences marks reaching this stage. Mezirow argued that all 10 stages must be accomplished to achieve transformation, although each stage is experienced in a variety of orders and depths. Additionally, transformation may occur suddenly or slowly. Sudden transformation tends to be more painful and less common than slow transformation (Mezirow, 1985). Regardless of whether transformation is sudden or gradual, the change—once complete—is irreversible.

Implementing transformative learning into a leadership development program requires deliberate planning and facilitation. Knouse (2022), who studied the transformative effects of study abroad programs for undergraduate students, explained that to ensure that transformative learning participants reap the full benefits of the learning environment, "preparation and interventions are needed" (Brewer & Cunningham, 2010, p. 3), including intentional reflection, defined as those purposeful activities in which learners critically analyze an experience or concept, question their prior assumptions, make connections with their funds of knowledge, and articulate how they will apply this generated learning moving forward (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Cunningham, 2010, p. 25). Without tools for reflection, deliberate time for reflection, and integration of any generated insights, learners' ability to confront the challenging situations endemic to transformative learning will be stunted and many important lessons lost (Knouse,

2022). The next section more deeply explores the needed design elements of transformative learning programs. Kwon et al. (2020) added based on their study of psychological safety and transformative learning outcomes that psychological safety led to transformative learning outcomes mediated by transformative learning processes including social support, attitude toward uncertainty and criticality.

Design Elements of Transformative Learning Programs

Compared to conventional training, transformative learning involves a unique approach to development that requires different mindsets, skills, and patterns of involvement from facilitators and participants alike (Brookfield, 2009; Nemec, 2012). Moreover, because the traditional mental model for training tasks learners with acquiring discrete sets of information and successful completion of tasks (Nemec, 2012), "many learners lack the inclination and skill needed for [the] 'deep' analytic exploration" required in transformative learning (p. 479). Brookfield (2009) added, "Whoever is charged with getting people to question assumptions they have previously been happy embracing is likely to be resented, at least initially" (p. 134). Therefore, transformative learning programs typically involve five features that help set the stage for learners to engage in deep reconsideration and revision of their mental models: learner-centered design, one or more disorienting events, reflection and dialogue, psychological safety, and ample time.

First, in order to design and facilitate a potentially transformative experience, the facilitator needs to clarify the overall purpose and objectives of the activity. To the extent possible, learners also need to be able to express their own concerns, needs, and interests during the transformative learning experience (Nemec, 2012). Moreover, when possible, training should be organized and delivered as a response to learner needs rather than as a forced shaping of

behavior through mandatory instruction. Developing learner-centered objectives and careful orientation to the value and purpose of the training also will help.

Second, a fundamental design element of any transformative learning program is one or more disorienting events that prime the individual for transformation and help bring into question the effectiveness or usefulness of the individual's governing mental model (Johnson, 2008). Experiences (e.g., experiential learning) tend to be more disruptive than mere exposure to knowledge (Nemec, 2012) and can be precipitated through new challenges (e.g., increasing the individual's scope of responsibility), completing self-assessments or receiving honest feedback from others about one's performance and style, thus, facilitating the individual's critical reflection regarding how they might improve, storytelling, and providing opportunities for the individual to try new approaches and behaviors (Johnson, 2008). Discovery learning, where learners uncover principles and ideas rather than having them presented, also is conducive to transformation. Scaffolding of experiences, where one experience or exercise builds upon another, additionally can set the stage for incremental transformation.

Johnson (2008) added that leaders who desire optimal career growth should take responsibility of their own development by determining what activities will disrupt in service of career advancement—and then strive to experience such events early and often throughout their career. Within the context of formal professional or academic development, disorienting or disruptive learning experiences ideally are carefully calculated, pretested, and engineered to support learners in taking a new perspective when examining an old problem (Nemec, 2012).

The third design feature is that the disorienting event must be accompanied by critical reflection and deep dialogue where learners examine their abilities, beliefs, assumptions, and values in ways that change them in some significant way (Johnson, 2008; Knouse, 2022; Nemec,

2012). The dialogue often focuses on examining a dilemma, paradox, conflict, or contradiction—whether experienced in a training activity or presented for discussion. The process of the dialogue is to consider and evaluate alternate interpretations or actions, while considering the assumptions, values, beliefs, and potential consequences of each option (Reushle & Mitchell, 2009).

Fourth, in order for learners to deeply engage in disorienting activities, reflection, and dialogue, they must perceive the facilitator and the training environment as psychologically and emotionally safe (Nemec, 2012). The degree to which these exist influences the amount of self-disclosure, questioning, and risk-taking that may be observed within the group. For example, if "credit" is based on seat-time and one's classmates are hoping that a silent group of trainees will result in getting out early, then there is little incentive to participate. For example, expressing criticism and looking for the so-called right answer tends to diminish trust and psychological safety, while confidentiality of the learning experience and creating an atmosphere of errorless learning tend to increase the sense of trust and safety (Velligan et al., 2006). Facilitators who possess strong interpersonal skills, demonstrate genuine concern for participants, and display understanding of the learners' contexts additionally convey the sense of safety for learners.

A final critical design feature in transformative learning is allowing ample time for transformation to occur, given the depth of learning involved in these types of learning experiences. For example, adequate time for discussion—such as one third of each face-to-face transformative learning session—needs to be included in the design if exploration and transformation of mental models is to become possible (Johnson, 2008; Nemec, 2012). This also means that the entire learning experience should extend over several days, weeks, or (preferably) months to allow adequate opportunity for questions, exploration, application, experimentation,

and more questions. Nemec (2012) emphasized that substantial time generally is needed to convert experiences, new ideas, and conversations into new ways of thinking, seeing, and hearing. Hobson and Welbourne (2006) analyzed the intellectual discourses of adult development and adult learning, arguing that through a process of transformative adult learning individuals can experience the disintegration and reintegration of past and present human growth. They concluded that adult development, from a transformative perspective, is more than adjustment to a particular society; it is a qualitative change in how one views the world; it involves tension and struggle that are productive of a new consciousness. This change occurs through a dialectical process that calls for movement through the old style of meaning-making to a reconstruction of meaning that is a synthesis of the old and the new. It is also concluded that adult learning can foster critical awareness and critical consciousness that can effect a transformation in the way adults see themselves and others. The route to transformative adult development and transformative learning lies in acknowledging contradictions and differences and working through them, as opposed to ignoring or circumventing them.

Summary

HGFs have earned significant attention in research and practice due to their contributions to regional job growth, economic performance, and innovation (Acs & Mueller, 2008; Julien, 2007; Mason & Brown, 2010; Mason et al., 2009). HGFs' need for rapid and sustained growth mean that their leaders need to have strong capabilities (Avolio et al., 2010; Day et al., 2014; Solansky, 2010; Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 2017). In particular, scripted informational learning experiences cannot adequately reflect the complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, and urgency of real-world challenges faced by HGF leadership teams. Leadership development for HGF managers might be most effective if they incorporate transformative learning, wherein the

leaders would engage in deep reflection and revision of their ways of perceiving, understanding, and responding to their environments (Johnson, 2008; Reuber & Fischer, 1999). The present study is built upon the body of literature and research reviewed in this chapter to examine the possible transformative impacts of a leadership development program in one HGF. The next chapter describes the methods used in this study.

Chapter 3

Methods

This study examined a leadership development program within one HGF. The research question was: What are trainee perceptions of the impact of the leadership development program? The study objectives were:

1. Identify the effects of the leadership development program reported by participants. 2. Identify which program elements participants believed contributed to their transformative learning. This chapter describes the methods used in this study. The research design and research setting are described first. Procedures for recruiting participants and the ethical considerations observed to protect them are outlined next. The data sources are then reviewed and the procedures for collecting and analyzing the data are outlined.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative exploratory single case study design. Qualitative research acknowledges that multiple subjective realities exist surrounding any examined phenomenon and, thus, involves the collection of richly detailed data gathered through methods including interviews, observations, and questionnaires, among other approaches (Patton, 2014). The benefit of qualitative research is that it allows for gauging capturing the nuances of human behavior and perception (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Qualitative research is appropriate for studies where limited prior research is available and where a flexible approach is needed to allow for trustworthy data to be gathered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because the focus was on gathering participants' inner experiences of transformation. Transformative learning has not been studied in this specific population and it was desired to conduct a first study that focused on participant experiences and perceptions.

Case study research involves examining one or more real-world bounded cases, where each case is an individual, group, organization, or system (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A single case study focuses on one case, with the purpose of developing an in-depth understanding of that case, whereas a multiple case study examines two or more cases, with the purpose of developing an understanding of several cases. A case study design is appropriate when deep understanding of the case or cases are desired, when a complex set of psychologically rich qualitative information will be gathered, or when few cases are available for study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study was considered appropriate for the present study because an in-depth understanding of the leadership program and its effects on the research setting was desired.

Research Setting

The setting for this study was a marketing and entertainment agency ("MEA Inc.") headquartered in the western United States. The study design was a case study because, as described in the previous section, the intention was to develop an in-depth understanding of the impact of the leadership development program designed specifically for this research setting. Case study was considered appropriate for the present study because an in-depth understanding of the leadership program and its effects on the research setting was desired.

MEA Inc. was founded by four equal partners within the past 10 years. At the time of the study, MEA Inc. employed a staff of more than 150 people. In the year following the leadership development program examined in this study, MEA Inc. reported its highest revenue in its history and hired 60 new staff. Based on both revenue and headcount growth, MEA Inc. has satisfied the criteria of an HGF.

The leadership development program examined in this study was delivered to 10 executive-level leaders from across the organization. The cohort completed the program

February–September 2021. The program consisted of eight group sessions and monthly individual coaching over the course of eight months. It is important to note that study interviews were conducted by the same individual who designed and facilitated the leadership development program.

This bespoke program was designed expressly for MEA Inc. for the purpose of bringing together a group of high-level leaders for an accelerated growth experience. Program focuses included cultivating communication skills, emotional intelligence, conflict management, self-awareness, and coping skills, gaining tools for breaking down silos and building a strong network of support for continued leadership development, and learning techniques for creating healthy, collaborative teams within the organization, and gaining clarity for future impact. The program's four stated goals were:

1. Understanding Self: Growing participants' self-confidence, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and organizational impact.

2. Understanding Team: Gaining insight about the effects of participants' development on organization members.

3. Understanding Culture: Learning about the benefits of collaboration and support system of the group across departments.

4. Achieving Sustainability: Helping leaders to not just survive, but thrive during unforeseen challenges or seasons.

The program consisted of eight 6-hour highly experiential and interactive sessions that met in person once per month during work hours (see Table 1). Reflection exercises were built into each session.

Table 1

Curricular Overview by Session

Session	Focus	Description	Tools and Activities
1	Personal Development	Leadership is a whole-person endeavor. Great leaders must begin by understanding themselves and the impression you project.	Impression branding Strengths Health and wellness Expectations & Commitments Goal Setting & Gameplan Energy Management
2	Interpersonal Development	Building your awareness of your strengths and how to use them as well as practical strategies to increase the effectiveness of your communication with different types of people.	Emotional intelligence Casting shared values and vision StrengthsFinder Time Management
3	Team Development	Leading teams successfully motivates employees and builds trust among them, the result being increased productivity, retention, and results. We will review the crucial aspects of being a healthy team member, praise and polish, creating influence, developing others and recognition styles.	Ideal Team Player Conscious Leadership
4	Collaboration	How you go about seeking and creating an environment of collaboration will greatly determine your success. This session will focus on group listening, empathy, diversity, inclusion, equity and communication.	Cracking the Code MBA Assessment 360 Review Mentorship Mapping
5	Conflict	This session builds your ability to handle and thrive in conditions of conflict by creating opportunities for healthy conflict and learning how to embrace and face it directly.	Five Dysfunctions of a Team Conflict Types Crucial Conversations
6	Communication	Communication is such a cornerstone of a healthy team and we will use tools and models to allow participants to curate their own tools to use with their team when doing their own development with respective teams.	Dare To Lead Table Group Assessment Infinite Game
7	Generous Leadership	Learn about leading with generosity and how to optimize this bottom-up approach within our organization. Learn to build a culture of trust, openness and constant growth mindset through serving those you lead.	Infinite Game Give and Take SMART Goals
8	Driving Change	Dive deeper into the internal dynamics and challenges involved with change management. We will focus on how you go back to your company to create lasting change and growth, not only in yourself, but in others in your organization.	Leadership Mapping Culture of Feedback

In addition to the sessions, participants completed a range of additional activities to optimize their learning. These activities included:

1. Manage-up email to participants' supervisors following each session to share new insights, new learning and intended applications, goals and progress, feedback about the session, and resources and materials. Each participant reflected on their experiences in the session and then wrote and sent the email to their supervisor.

2. Four presentations delivered over the course of the 8 months. The presentations share their learning and are delivered internally or externally, both online and in person. Each participant developed and delivered the presentations based on their reflections regarding their learning from the session and how the content may apply uniquely to their function, team, and tasks.

3. One coaching session per group session was provided to create accountability and follow through on their goals, identify and overcome challenges, and to identify strengths and create opportunities to lead and collaborate well with others. Coaching invited participants to reflect on their session experiences, including their reactions, new understanding, knowledge and skill acquisition, intended and actual behavior changes, and results achieved from applying their learning.

4. Peer-to-peer pairing per group session to accelerate participants' professional and personal interconnections to establish or build on a common ground for trust, vulnerability, and quality feedback. These pair discussions were held one-on-one between participants and centered on eliciting and comparing their reflections and learning from the program.

5. Six self-report and one 360-degree assessment to provide participants with insights and feedback about their strengths, growth areas, and impact on others. Participants were instructed to reflect on the results and contemplate the implications of these assessments for their work.

7. One Goals Gameplan to help participants identify, structure, and track progress on strategic objectives. In the Goals Gameplan, each participant reflected on the course content and their own learning and then set specific, time-bound goals related to their leadership behaviors, approaches, and results.

Throughout the 8-month program, participants formed a learning group cohort in order to learn from each other, become more collaborative in their respective teams, reduce or eliminate departmental silos, provide and receive feedback, and take part in energizing experiences that contribute to mutual professional growth. Due to the program's incorporation of experiential

activities, reflection, and dialogue; its focus on deepening participants' personal and professional awareness, behaviors, and outcomes; and its aims of increasing the organization's leadership capacities, it met the criteria for transformative leadership development. However, confirming that the program had a transformative effect (i.e., whether it disrupted world view/mindset and led to greater integration and a more sophisticated understanding) requires examination. Gathering preliminary data of participants' perception of these effects was the focus of the present study.

Participants

All 10 leaders who completed the leadership development program at MEA Inc. were invited to participate in the study. Participants received an email invitation (see Appendix A) describing the study, the details of participation, and the voluntary nature of taking part in the study. Participants also signed the informed consent form (see Appendix B) before completing an interview.

Ethical Considerations

The Pepperdine University Institutional Review Board provided oversight for the study, all human subjects safeguards were implemented to protect participants, and permission to conduct the study at MEA Inc. was obtained from the company's chief executive officer (see Appendix C). Study participation was voluntary. Participants received an informed consent statement before completing an interview and any questions they had about the study were answered in advance of their participation. Participants were permitted to decline to answer any question or drop out of the study at any time without penalty. Interview participation remained confidential and any identifying information (e.g., participant name) was not be gathered to shield participants' identities.

Data Collection

Data were collected using interviews. The interview script consisted of seven questions (see Appendix D). After thanking the participants for taking part in the interview, the first two questions helped ease participants into the discussion and gain their open-ended impressions about the program and report whether it was a positive experience. One question captured the effects of the program. Three questions asked participants to evaluate whether the program was transformative, identify program elements that contributed to the change, and suggest program changes to make it even more beneficial. To close the interview, participants were asked whether they would like to offer any other insights about the program, their development as a leader, or the group. Table 2 presents the research question and study objectives and how the interview questions aligned with these.

Each interview was conducted with each participant using Zoom web conference software. Each interview lasted 15-24 minutes in duration, yielding a total of 202 audio minutes of data. The conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed using Zoom software features. Supplementary handwritten notes also were taken during each interview to capture the researcher's reflections and thoughts over the course of the interview.

Data Analysis

Interview data were examined using content analysis as described by Miles et al. (2019) and Creswell and Creswell (2018):

1. All interview transcripts were read several times to familiarize the researcher with the general meaning and ideas conveyed in the interviews.

2. Each response was reviewed question by question to identify the main ideas and a theme was applied to each.

3. Data were reorganized based on the themes identified.

4. The number of participants reporting each theme was calculated when the analysis was finished.

5. A second coder who was a graduate student reviewed the analysis to gauge its accuracy. The analysis was revised until the researcher and second coder agreed on the results.

Table 2

Alignment Between Research Question, Study Objectives, and Interview Questions

Interview Question	Research Question: Perceived program impacts	Objective 1. Reported program effects	Objective 2. Transformative program elements
1. Please briefly describe your experience in the Champions program.	X	X	
2. Do you believe this was a positive experience for you—Yes or No?	X	X	
3. How did it affect you? a. Your relationships? b. Your team? c. Your organization?	X	X	
4. Do you consider this experience to be transformative? Why or why not?	X	X	X
5. What aspects, activities, or elements of the program contributed to these changes?			X
6. What, if anything, would you add, change, or remove regarding the program to make it even more beneficial for you or the group?	X	X	X
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the program, your development as a leader, or the group?	X	X	X

Chapter 4

Results

This study examined a leadership development program within one HGF. The research question was: What are trainee perceptions of the impact of the leadership development program? The study objectives were:

1. Identify the effects of the leadership development program reported by participants.

2. Identify which program elements participants believed contributed to their transformative learning.

This chapter reports the results of the study. Participants' general impressions of the program are presented first, followed by a report of the effects of the program. Participants' comments regarding the transformative nature of the program are then outlined. The chapter closes with a summary.

Participants' General Impressions

To begin the interview, participants were asked to briefly describe their experience in the program. This question was asked to ease participants into the conversation and gather their initial impressions. Analysis of the participants' responses indicated four general themes (see Table 3). Seven of the 10 participants reported that they enjoyed the program. One participant noted, "I think that from where I stand now looking back, I thoroughly enjoyed it. My experience was so overwhelmingly positive." Another emphasized, "I really loved my experience." A third participant explained, "I think it was an amazing learning experience. … I really enjoyed it."

Table 3

General Impressions

Participant Reflections	n
Enjoyed the program	7
Program required commitment and engagement	6
Program impact contingent on individual and organizational readiness	4
Program was substantial and high quality	2

N = 10

Six participants reported that the program required commitment and engagement, demonstrated through a receptive attitude; deep commitment to doing the work; and dedicating effort to attend the sessions and to complete the in-session exercises as well as between-session reading, assessments, presentations, coaching, partner dialogues, Goals Gameplan, and other assignments. Two participants admitted they initially did not have a receptive attitude or positive expectations regarding the program. One shared, "At the beginning, I came in, with a chip on my shoulder," adding, "and I did not get a lot of those first few sessions, because of that." Each added that by the midpoint of the program, they realized they were not getting as much from the program as other participants and chose to engage. The other participant recalled:

> At the start of the program, I was just like, "I don't want to be in this. I want to bail." But then I thought about what [my boss] said: "This program is really great. But you can't expect to get a lot out of this without putting that into it." I definitely feel that's super true. So I did, and then I sure enough found it rewarding, and saw the value.

These two participants' initial reluctance also had a ripple effect through the group, as another participant noted:

> You're only as strong as your weakest member. So it's about having people that are really into it and buying in. That makes it even more powerful when people are really present and a part of the process, and you can feel it when you don't have that. A successful program requires a lot of buy-in from the people in the group and you have to invest a lot of time to get to that point of buying in. Once

the buy-in happens, there's almost like a watershed moment of, "Hey we're all in this together" thing that happens that is really valuable for the group experience.

Another three participants emphasized the amount of work the program required, with one reflecting, "it's a lot more work than people realize," and another sharing, "It's been a challenge to fit it in professionally and into my personal life." Another elaborated:

> The structure of the program communicates a level of preparedness and level of commitment that I think does a good job of forcing the hand of folks to step up to meet the challenge or not, but not to be able to use anything as an excuse or a crutch.

Four participants indicated that the program's impact is contingent on individual and organizational readiness for change. One participant pointed out, "people transform at different rates, or maybe take larger or smaller steps," suggesting that participants in these types of programs tend to reach key milestones at different points throughout the program. This concept was further demonstrated by the participants whose initial reluctance delayed their experience of personal transformation. One of these participants noted:

> If you want the program to be transformative, it provides all of the tools for you to do that. But if you come in thinking "it's this crazy thing that my bosses are making me do," it's not going to be a transformative experience for you.

Two additional participants commented that current conditions in the organization also can affect the extent to which participants transfer their learning to their teams and daily work. One noted, "There's just an insane amount of growth happening organizationally," another elaborated:

> I think that we do a really good job of coming together for the program, and then we go back to our lives, our corners, our responsibilities. There's just so much to do day to day, and it gets in the way of some real important growth that could happen.

Report Effects of the Program

During the interview, participants were asked how the program affected their relationships, team, and organization. Their responses helped to answer Research Question 2, what do participants identify as the effects of the leadership development program? Analysis of the participants' responses indicated four effects (see Table 4).

Table 4

Report Effects of the Program

Impact	n
Produced personal transformative change	10
Improved cross-organizational alignment and collaboration	10
Program ignited organizational growth and change	8
Fostered learning and development	7

N = 10

All 10 participants reported they experienced personal transformative change as a result of the program, evidenced by shifting old ways of thinking and sparking new perspectives; cultivating new roles, behaviors, and relationships; increasing their self-awareness and self-confidence; and gaining new knowledge, tools, and resources. One participant summarized this experience, "where I was in the middle, and where I was at the end of the program are very, very different."

In terms of shifting old ways of thinking and sparking new perspectives during the program, many spoke about learning about different leadership styles and understanding personality differences on their teams. They also described themes about how they saw themselves differently, from a new perspective and how the material, like presentations, helped them to consider different interpretations of the material and concepts being shared. One participant shared, "Even with some of the material that I was familiar with, I definitely

experienced a lot of it in a different way, or through a different light." One participant shared, "I

understand better how people like to receive feedback and what their strengths are," while

another elaborated:

> I think the DISC … and Strengths Finder were helpful not only understand that
> not everyone should operate like you. There are multiple ways to get things done,
> and people respond or react to things differently, and understanding and
> positioning those values, whether it was the Strengths Finder or the DiSC
> assessment, it showed that there are ways to work around or adapt to different
> workflow styles or the way people perceive work, and that was that was really
> good to me. It's just like hey, not everyone needs to be super alpha aggressive,
> raising their hand immediately. That isn't always the way to go. Definitely eye-
> opening.

In terms of cultivating new roles, behaviors, and relationships, participants reported

making changes to their management behaviors, such as recruiting, mentoring, communicating,

ways of organizing their work, reframing, and prioritizing goals differently. Another participant

noted that the program "gave us common language so that we can do it together. I think that's

transformative just in its nature." Another participant summarized, "I feel like I have grown a lot

in terms of how to approach things, … how to challenge others, how to rumble with

vulnerability, how to have hard discussions. All the things that managers really need to do, but

do it in a way that feels really true to who I am." Yet another participant offered a specific

application of their learnings:

> A lot of the discoveries that came through exercises around Ideal Team Player
> have been used on a daily basis now. It's really helped. We use that as kind of a
> North star for new hires and mentoring our team that's currently with us to
> basically continue to grow them into leaders.

Related to increased self-awareness and self-confidence, participants shared statements

like, "I feel like I've learned so much about myself" and "I learned to trust my own instinct. I am

a lot more self-assured." One of the participants noted:

> Learning different things about my working style and even some of the ways that
> I've changed…The ways that I've adapted…new material that helped me think

about myself and experiences that I'm having every day. I'm thinking about the goals that we have and the ways that I want to be able to contribute as a leader. I felt like I learned a lot personally about myself.

The final manifestation of personal transformative change reported by participants concerned gaining new knowledge, tools, and resources. Participants shared about reading, assessments and specific models of leadership as enabling them and their teams to be able to generate ongoing team enhancements. Several participants identified the specific models they had learned, shared with their team, and implemented into their daily practice. Two participants described their use of Ideal Team Player:

I really try to operate around those parameters of being humble, hungry, and smart, and having that as a conscious marker for me just helped my everyday decision making, as I'm working and also assessing the value of team members as well too.

One example is that we've been doing a lot of hiring within my team, and one of the topics that I chose to do skill sharing with my team on was the Ideal Team Player book and the kind of philosophy around what characteristics, to look for and building a team of high caliber, highly cooperative individual.

All 10 participants also described experiencing improved cross-organizational alignment and collaboration as a result of the program. Participants explained that such effects were made possible and were manifested through the development of a common language, fostering a sense of connection, increasing their understanding of and confidence in their colleagues, and forging trusting relationships. During the interviews, not only did participants explicitly point out gaining a common language (e.g., "I'm starting to see this common language that we've shared through it"), but also the participants spontaneously and naturally used this common language in their responses. Examples of this included "I want to give polish and not just praise," when asked for feedback about the program and "I've learned how to rumble with vulnerability" when asked for examples of behavioral change. Other participants described the benefits of having this common language in saying, "It's opened up the lines of communication, where people feel a lot more

comfortable with each other and we're just able just to kind of jump right in. It's helped us establish kind of like a shorthand." Another explained:

> The program gave us a lot of shared language for talking about the things that we were dissecting. Then that evolved into more of an open dialogue with ongoing communication between the management to examine how we work together and carry out our business practices in ways that helped me and my team level up the way in which we approach hiring and interviewing people.

Participants explained that the sense of connection created through the program also fueled the alignment and collaboration they experienced. One participant noted, "It bonded us that we had gone through something together and continue to grow together, and watch each other grow, and that's really powerful." Another elaborated:

> I bonded so much with the people that were in the group. My main takeaway was just getting to know all of them, and spending time with them was super positive. Being connected more with the team, I could go to [any participant]. Moving forward, we're connected in that way, so we can do that now. It's less of an issue to hit up and reach out to other departments.

Cross-organizational alignment and collaboration was further made possible through the understanding of and confidence in their colleagues gained through the program, revealed in multiple participants expressing the sentiment, "I've learned so much about my co-workers." Another elaborated:

> I don't work with [name] every day. I don't work with the [name] every month. [Through the program, I got] a little bit of perspective on their way of doing the MEA thing and how they operate. Normally, we don't get that level of interaction and I don't always know those things off the bat, like [name] works like this, or [name] works like that. … Getting to know and speak to these leaders and understanding how they work on a deeper level than a job description was eye-opening. … Knowing that these people are capable and more than adequate leaders in their fields was a good thing to for me to assess, not only from a management and leadership colleague level, but also for my staff and my employees as well.

Finally, participants noted that the trusting relationships formed through the program enabled cross-organizational alignment and collaboration. Participants reflected:

I now feel more comfortable communicating with people who I didn't interface with as much prior to the program. The process of learning in a cooperative environment with other people builds trust and generally levels up the entire group of people, because of the dialogue and discussion.

This program allowed me to get closer to some of my teammates in a way that felt very natural and very authentic. If not for this program, I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to do that in such a short time and in such a safe group setting.

Transformative Nature of the Program

All 10 participants found the program to be transformative to varying degrees. When asked whether they considered the experience to be transformative, four participants reported affirmatively. One of these participants noted, "In its DNA, that's what it is. It's transformative in its nature." Five additional participants agreed, albeit with qualifications. For example, three of these participants were careful to note they were not a fundamentally different person as a result of the program. One of these participants elaborated:

I think there's a hyperbolized concept that transformation is this caterpillar into a butterfly kind of a thing, and I don't necessarily know that I would say to that extreme of, "Wow, I'm fundamentally a completely different manager today," but I definitely think that it has caused transformations to occur within both the people in it as individuals, but also collectively as an organization.

Another commented, "Yes, I think it's in subtle ways; it's not an overnight, 'Oh, this change made a big impact in one way'; but, yes, in a lot of subtle ways for sure." Yet another participant reported they anticipated transformation in the future but had not experienced it yet due to a heavy workload.

Participants next were asked to identify the elements of the program they believed contributed to transformation. Analysis of participants' responses indicated five elements (see Table 5). Nine of the 10 participants cited tools and resources that surfaced and challenged their mental models, including self-assessments, practical tools and models, and feedback. One participant stressed the value of a particular leadership style they learned about:

Situational Leadership has been really big for me lately, because I think that was a personal weakness of mine. I like to be a high-support sort of leader, and I now find myself with a younger team, where I needed to be a lot more directive, and I didn't really have the language to identify that for myself and then put me on a path where I could build a plan that was appropriate so that was huge for me.

Another participant noted that the tools paired with discussion was valuable: "Learning really is mainly about perspective, so the tools we have learned, alongside the discussions we've had frames different perspectives." Yet another participant illustrated the impact of feedback:

Some of the most powerful moments for me were when we had to come up with something to say about the other eight, or hearing what they had to say about me. If eight people are saying something about you, and you're saying something else about yourself, something's broken.

Table 5

Program Elements

Transformative Program Element	n
Tools and resources that surface and challenge mental models	9
Shared learning through application in the workplace	7
Interactive activities and dialogue	6
Acquiring knowledge and skills	4
Psychological and emotional safety	3
Space for critical reflection	2
Challenge and discomfort	2

$N = 10$

Seven participants expressed that the shared learning that resulted from applying program concepts in the workplace were a vital and transformative part of the leadership development program. Participants noted the value of being able to "share common business experiences [with other program participants] and to pick their brain and learn from them." One participant described this aspect of the program and its effects in this way:

Shared learning required us to take some of the things we've learned in the program and share them with other groups and with the company as a whole. We

also did this in very small groups and pods, check-ins, and one-on-ones. Through all of this, you're starting to see those tools, common language, and practices— like what makes a good hire—being adopted in unexpected places around the company. It's a ripple effect.

Six participants stated that they found the interactive activities and dialogue to be highly transformative. One participant described the value of these experiences in this way:

I know for myself, and I would guess for many other people, people never really dig into content on their own. This is something that you are exposed to and it's a shared learning experience. Whereas, if you did this in a vacuum by yourself, you probably have some great takeaways, but the open forum conversations enable you to unpack the books we read and the different lessons that we went through. Then hearing everyone's presentations about how they interpret it and how it became personal to them, you just get a different perspective. It's not just your own vision of watching a Ted talk or reading the book or going to one seminar. I think it's really great to have like a bigger team that feels like a class together since it's more like a shared learning experience.

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

The group discussions were really valuable. It wasn't just, "Here's your homework. Go do it on your own answer these questions." Instead, it was about building conversations around those things, with other team leaders, and getting those other perspectives. This helped the materials really resonate and marinate beyond just my interpretation of it.

Other participants emphasized the importance of the in-person group activities, with one participant adding, "That stuff is where I just felt the happiest in going through it." These participants stated:

The group activities, where it's less about lecturers' time or "let's all individually write things in a book," were really valuable. To me, the things that were the most transformative were when we really were looking at each other instead of looking only inwardly.

Doing all the activities and exercises with people, not just on Zoom or reading about it in reports, were important. I felt like this immersive experience is what made the program so valuable and unique and transformative because it really helps you grow together.

Summary

This chapter reported the results gathered regarding the transformative leadership development program. Findings for the study's two study objectives were reported. The next chapter provides a summary and discussion of these results.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusions

This study examined a leadership development program within one HGF. The research question was: What are trainee perceptions of the impact of the leadership development program? The study objectives were:

1. Identify the effects of the leadership development program reported by participants.

2. Identify which program elements participants believed contributed to their transformative learning.

This chapter discusses the results of the study. Summary of the Key Findings are presented first, followed by conclusions. Study limitations and suggestions for further research are then presented.

Summary of the Key Findings

Study findings revealed that participants reported that they enjoyed the program. They also noted that the program required commitment and engagement and that the program's impact was contingent on individual and organizational readiness. These findings are consistent with training evaluation and transformative learning literature. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2016) evaluate participants' general reactions toward and feelings about the training as part of their assessments, explaining that these reactions influence the degree to which participants will attend to, learn, and apply the material. Furthermore, persistence despite discomfort, challenge, and disorientation is necessary for transformative learning to occur (Kegan, 1982; Nemec, 2012; Taylor & Jarecke, 2009). Thus, by striking a balance between enjoyment and challenge, participants may be able to find sufficient reward in exchange for their willingness to commit to the process and endure the pain and discomfort of transformation.

All 10 participants (100%) reported experiencing personal transformative change as a result of the program, evidenced by shifting old ways of thinking and sparking new perspectives; cultivating new roles, behaviors, and relationships; increasing their self-awareness and self-confidence; and gaining new knowledge, tools, and resources. The program also reportedly improved cross-organizational alignment and collaboration, ignited organizational growth and change, and fostered the leaders' learning and development. These findings are consistent with transformative learning and leadership development literature, which suggest that transformative leadership development involves formal, intentional training intended to improve the organization's leadership capacity (Avolio et al., 2010; Day et al., 2014; Solansky, 2010) by shifting leaders' mental models and ways of perceiving and understanding themselves, their organizations, and their environments (Johnson, 2008; Nemec, 2012). Based on these findings, it appears that the program examined in this study achieved its aims of transformation and serves as a suitable tool for growing leadership competencies.

Study findings tentatively suggest based on self-reports that the program was transformative. Specifically, as reported in chapter 4, when asked whether they considered the experience to be transformative, four out of the 10 participants reported affirmatively. Five additional participants out of the 10 agreed it was transformative, although three of these participants were careful to note they were not a fundamentally different person as a result of the program, and another added that the shifts were subtle. Yet another participant reported they anticipated transformation in the future but had not experienced it yet due to a heavy workload. As noted in chapter 3, the program focuses included cultivating communication skills, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and coping skills, gaining tools for breaking down silos and building a strong network of support for continued leadership development, and learning

techniques for creating healthy, collaborative teams within the organization, and gaining clarity for future impact.

The most commonly cited features that contributed to participants' transformative experience, based on their self-report, included tools and resources that surfaced and challenged their mental models, shared learning through application in the workplace, interactive activities and dialogue, and acquiring knowledge and skills, among others. These findings are consistent with transformative learning literature, which indicated that transformative learning programs typically feature learner-centered design, one or more disorienting events, reflection and dialogue, psychological safety, and ample time (Johnson, 2008; Knouse, 2022; Nemec, 2012; Reushle & Mitchell, 2009; Velligan et al., 2006). Accordingly, based on the results of this study, the program examined in this research was validated by participants and extant literature as qualifying as a transformative leadership development program.

Conclusions

1. Threats to leadership development in HGFs. The characteristics of HGFs as well as the conditions surrounding them pose substantial threats to the success of transformational leadership development. These threats emerge from the time pressures, resource constraints, and aggressive performance and growth goals endemic to HGFs. These threats can obstruct participants' readiness for change on both a collective and individual level. Readiness should be carefully evaluated before commencing a program and any obstacles should be reconciled to support the success of transformative learning.

2. Paradox of leadership development in resource-constrained firms. In order for leaders in HGFs to benefit from a transformative leadership development program, they must embrace the paradox of dedicating time, effort, and energy to the program, despite the intense time

pressures and resource constraints they face. Transformation requires separation from old ways

of being, learning and experimentation, culminating in shifting one's beliefs, values, and

behaviors (Mezirow, 2000); as participants noted, it is "a lot of work" that requires commitment

and engagement for success. Making sure that the learning is strongly connected to participants'

work helps a great deal to soften the difficulty of the commitment and engagement required for

program success.

3. Outsized leadership development takeaways in HGFs. Transformative learning may be

particularly powerful within HGFs given their heightened ability to capture the innovations

derived from new knowledge (Muller, 2007), create and capture value (Mohr & Garnsey, 2011),

and contribute in outsized ways to their local economies (Qian et al., 2013). Capitalizing on these

outsized gains was built into the design, where action learning plans were created, participants

worked on issues in their daily work lives, and then participants returned to the next session

where they reported to the cohort or small group.

4. Higher leadership development returns for less experienced leaders. HGF managers

and leaders tend to be less experienced than those in established firms and typically have had less

management practice and training. Accordingly, transformative learning programs may yield

more marked shifts and higher returns in HGFs.

5. Transcending micromanagement. In HGFs, micromanagement by leaders is more

common due to the intense time pressures and need for all the organization's resources to be

maximally utilized. The transformative leadership program examined in this study completely

disrupted this management approach, forcing the leaders to rethink their leadership style, retrain

themselves and their direct reports, and re-enter the leader-subordinate relationship in a fresh

way. Participants reported that their shifted approaches led to improved team membership results.

Recommendations to OD Practitioners

1. Evaluate organizational and participant readiness. Study conclusions emphasized that HGF characteristics (i.e., limited time and resources coupled with steep performance and growth goals) pose serious threats to transformational leadership development. OD practitioners should thoroughly and carefully assess individual and collective readiness during the contracting phase to identify and be able to address potential program threats. Assessment can occur through diagnostic conversations and assessments.

2. Construct communication plans. HGF leaders stand to reap substantial medium- and long-term gains from transformative leadership development programs. However, these gains come at the cost of short-term sacrifices of time, effort, and energy. OD practitioners need to engage in effective and customized communication plans to aid the participants in understanding that this paradox of dedicating scarce resources, commitment, and engagement to leadership development can yield tremendous results for themselves, their teams, and their organization. Moreover, OD practitioners should provide examples of the outsized leadership development possible in HGFs to further motivate participants to fully engage in the process.

3. Communicate the possibility of substantial growth for HGF leaders. Study findings and extant literature revealed that HGF managers and leaders tend to be less experienced than their counterparts in more established firms. Moreover, HGF leaders tend to exhibit micromanaging behaviors due to the unique conditions facing these firms. These various dynamics indicate that HGF leader participants may anticipate substantial growth, behavioral shifts, and business results if they commit to the transformational leadership development process. These potential results

should be more thoroughly examined and, if validated as an outcome, this benefit should be central to the value proposition communicated to prospective participants and their organizations.

Study Limitations

Several limitations have affected this study:

1. Singular point of data collection. The results of this study were based on interviews that function as a delayed post-test to the program. This means that participants' reflections were gathered at one point in time several months after the conclusion of the program. While this may have allowed participants time to reflect upon the program and its impacts, it meant that real-time reactions could not be collected. Further, it is possible that participants may have forgotten some details or they may no longer be conscious of the impact of their experience. Use of pre-testing and immediate post-testing would be helpful to allow additional data gathering and comparison.

2. Limited assessment. The participants were to share their top-level impressions of the program. Participants were not reminded of the program design, its features, or the work involved in completing it. The design was not reviewed with participants because the researcher wanted to solicit their top-of-mind reactions. Therefore, it is possible that participants may have had additional feedback to share that they might have offered if questioned directly about specific parts of the program. An approach to assessment where participants are asked to evaluate discrete portions of the program may produce more detailed feedback and the program's transformative nature and impacts.

3. Dual relationship. Study interviews were conducted by the same individual who designed and facilitated the leadership development program. This means that the researcher may have been predisposed to solicit and focus on positive feedback and evidence of transformation. Future program evaluations are advised to be done by an impartial third-party researcher to reduce this risk of bias.

4. Self-reported data. This study relied on self-reported data, meaning that participants reported on how the program affected them and whether they found the program to be transformative. This leads to several kinds of participant biases, such as wanting to help the researcher by saying what they think she wants to hear or answering in ways that make them look good in the organization. Gathering performance data and 360-degree feedback from the participant's stakeholders would help produce further insights and evidence related to the program's effects.

5. Limited participant diversity. All but two participants were male. Additionally, limited age, race, or ethnic diversity was present in the sample. Minority participants, participants in different stages of their careers, and those with other demographic and career backgrounds might experience the program differently.

6. One organization. This study was conducted in only one organization. Leaders from a different organization—particularly one in a different industry or one of a different age or size—may have different observations and experiences related to the program.

7. Researcher inexperience. Conducting research interviews was a challenging and novel task for the researcher. It is likely that someone with more experience posing questions and probing participants' answers may generate more in-depth responses that, in turn, would affect the results.

Suggestions for Further Research

Four suggestions for research are offered based on the present study:

1. Gather more data. As discussed in the limitations section, the results of this study
   were based on interviews conducted at one point in time. This one point served as a
   delayed post-test to the program. Although this approach allowed participants to
   reflect on their experience, there was no data to compare it to, such as measuring
   participants' awareness, assumptions, values, and behaviors before the program,
   during the program, and immediately at the end of the program. Gathering data at
   these additional points in time would allow for more real-time reactions,
   identification of knowledge and skills acquired, cultivation of new behaviors,
   measurement of results, and assessment of the program's return on investment.
   Gathering data at multiple times may help prevent risks of data loss through forgotten
   memories and allow for a comparison of how participants change over time.
   Additionally, the use of 360-degree feedback gathered from the participants' peers,
   managers, and subordinates as well as collection of performance data would create
   additional data points and insights to help overcome the limitations of self-reported
   data.

2. Include pilot testing and practice interviews. Conducting research interviews is a skill
   still being developed by the researcher. In future studies conducted by this or other
   novice researchers, pilot interviews should be conducted and reviewed in order to
   cultivate the interviewers' skills and progressively gather richer and more complete
   data. More experienced interviewers also could be enlisted in the study as research
   assistants for this purpose.

3. Study more organizations. As noted in the limitations section, this study was conducted in only one organization. Although the intention of this study was to gain a first look at transformative learning within HGFs, leaders from other organizations likely would have different reactions and offer different evaluations of the program studied in this research. This may be particularly the case if the organization is in a different industry or if its leaders have had prior leadership development experiences. It would be helpful to conduct a multiple case study of organizations with varying characteristics to gain a more well-rounded understanding of leaders' perceptions of and experiences in the program examined in this research.

4. Include a more diverse sample. The sample for this study was very homogeneous, and participants of other ages, races, ethnicities, orientations, or backgrounds as well as those with corporate leadership experience or those at a different career stages may report different experiences with and impressions of the program. Therefore, it is critical to expand the study to include a more diverse sample. In particular, it would be helpful to assure that future studies recruit participants that are representative of their organizations.

In conclusion, the investment in transformative learning and development for HGFs can be the competitive advantage in a challenging market where there are limited resources in talent and development. As one participant stated,

> I think the relationships that I built are the most important thing. I would say that about this this experience in particular. The relationships are the most important. It allowed me to build relationships with the group of leaders … in a way that I think gives us all similar language that's very, very positive. That allows me to then trust them in a different sort of way, that first team sort of idea, than I would have been able to before we were a little bit more siloed. The experience was very positive, for me, because I needed that in particular.

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Appendix A: Study Invitation

Dear [*name*],

My name is Malika Begin, and I am a master's student in the Graziadio School of Business at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study in which I am studying the effects of leadership development programs, and I need your help! I am seeking volunteer study participants for a one-on-one interview to discuss your experience in the Champions leadership development program. Your participation in the study will be audio recorded and is anticipated to take no more than 30 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity as a participant will be protected before, during, and after the time that study data is collected. Strict confidentiality procedures will be in place. During and after the study. Your responses will be associated with a pseudonym of your choice and no information will be captured that reveal your identity.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in this study, please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your participation,

Malika Begin
Pepperdine University
Graziadio School of Business
Master's student
[contact information]

Appendix B: Informed Consent Statement

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

PEPPERDINE
— UNIVERSITY —

IRB #: 22-05-1844

Participant Study Title: Evaluating Leadership Development Program Impacts

Formal Study Title: Evaluating the impact of a transformative leadership development program on a high growth firm

Authorized Study Personnel
Principal Investigator: Malika Begin, MA Candidate   Office: [contact information]
Secondary Investigator: Miriam Lacey, Ph.D.   Office [contact information]

Key Information:
If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:
☐ Males and females age 18-75
☐ Procedures will include one 30-minute interview conducted via Zoom
☐ There are no risks associated with this study
☐ You will be provided a copy of this consent form

Invitation
You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?
You are being asked to be in this study because you completed the Champions leadership development program.

What is the reason for doing this research study?
Leadership development programs are designed to help companies improve their leaders' skillsets. This is particularly needed in companies that have aggressive growth goals. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the Champions program.

What will be done during this research study?
You will be asked to take part in one 30-minute interview via Zoom to discuss your feedback about the Champions program.

How will my data be used?
Your responses will be combined with all other participants' responses and common themes in the aggregate data will be identified. Any personal information that could identify you will be removed before the data are analyzed.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?
This research presents minimal risk of loss of confidentiality, emotional and/or psychological distress because the interviews involve questions about your experience with the program.

What are the possible benefits to you?
You are not expected to get any benefit from being in this study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?
The benefits to science and/or society may include better understanding of how to help leaders improve their skills.

What are the alternatives to being in this research study?
Instead of being in this research study you can choose to not participate.

What will being in this research study cost you?
There is no cost to you for being a participant in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?
No compensation will be provided for participating in this study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?
Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

How will information about you be protected?
Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for 3 years after the study is complete.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Pepperdine University, and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research subject?
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form. For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):
      Phone: 1(310)568-2305
      Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?
You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw') at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator, with Pepperdine University, or your employer. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant Feedback Survey
To meet Pepperdine University's ongoing accreditation efforts and to meet the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP) standards, an online feedback survey is included below: https://forms.gle/nnRgRwLgajYzBq5t7

Participant Name:

_____

Name of Participant: Please Print

Participant Signature:

_____   _____
Signature of Research Participant   Date

Investigator certification:
My signature certifies that all elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgment, the participant possesses the capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix C: Letter of Permission

5-2-22

Pepperdine University
Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB)
6100 Center Drive – 5th floor
Los Angeles, CA 90045

RE:
STUDENT INVESTIGATOR: Malika Begin, MS Candidate
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (PHD CHAIR): Dr. Miriam Lacey
STUDY: Evaluating the Impact of a Transformative Leadership Development Program on a High Growth Firm

To GPS IRB,

This letter is to convey that I/we have reviewed the proposed research study being conducted by Malika Begin, which involves conduct a 30-minute one-on-one interview with nine employees who attended the leadership development program February-October 2021. This site location is

We find the study named above to be acceptable. I/we give permission for the above investigators to conduct research at this site. If you have any questions regarding site permission, please contact:

Sincerely,

Appendix D: Interview Script

Thank you for volunteering to be part of the study. The purpose of my research is to examine the impact of the Champions program. Your insights will be pooled with others' and used to create an impact assessment process.

Warm-up Questions
1. Please briefly describe your experience in the Champions program.

2. Do you believe this was a positive experience for you—Yes or No?

Effect of the Program
3. How did it affect you?
   a. Your relationships?
   b. Your team?
   c. Your organization?

Transformative Nature of the Program
6. Do you consider this experience to be transformative? Why or why not?

7. What aspects, activities, or elements of the program contributed to these changes?

8. What, if anything, would you add, change, or remove regarding the program to make it even more beneficial for you or the group?

Closing Question
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about the program, your development as a leader, or the group?

Thanks so much for your insights—they are invaluable to me, the Champions program, and my research!