Developing Executives through the Exploration of Personal Histories: A Phenomenological Study of Transformative Learning in the Executive Development Process

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We all have a façade, a persona, a public self. What the persona does is what the world sees, but something very different may be happening deep inside, where our private selves hide. The public self that we choose to share generally bears little resemblance to the private self, a self so private that even we ourselves may know it only slightly.

— Kets De Vries (2001b, p. 75)

Abstract of Dissertation

Developing Executives through the Exploration of Personal Histories:
A Phenomenological Study of Transformative Learning in the
Executive Development Process

Although thousands of books and studies related to leadership have been completed over the past several years, there is no commonly held definition of leadership, leaving those who work to develop leaders in our organizations in a challenging position. This phenomenological study of transformative learning and executive development sought to further understand the nature of the transformative learning experience through the study of an executive-feedback process designed to help developing executives mature and learn, connecting early-childhood experiences to present-day behavior. This process, conducted by clinical psychologists in an organizational setting, is intended to bring these executives to a new level of awareness regarding the emotional and behavioral patterns manifested in their daily actions.

This researcher used the framework of transformative learning to better understand this executive-development experience. This study answers calls in the literature for a better understanding of the transformative-learning process and the practical way transformative learning happens and explored what Buchel and Antunes (2007) called the "greatest opportunity for further research" (p. 308), which is assessing outcomes of executive development programs. Additionally this study informed research and practice related to executive development within organizations. An idealized model for executive intrapersonal skill development is developed and presented.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to Bennis (2007), the leadership of our human institutions is one of the greatest threats facing the world. Siegel (2007) concurred, "We are in desperate need of a new way of being—in ourselves, in our schools, in our societies" (p. xv). According to the Center for Public Leadership's National Leadership Index (Pittinsky, Rosenthal, Bacon, Montoya, & Zhu, 2006), 70% of those polled believe there is a leadership crisis in the United States of America. Those polled have confidence in leaders in only two areas: the military and medicine. Confidence in business leaders ranked 4th from the bottom (out of 11 categories) with only Congressional leaders, Executive Branch leaders, and leaders in the press scoring lower marks.

Given the popularity of the concept of leadership and society's fascination with leaders, researchers, book authors, and the popular press have led the overwhelming amount of literature in an effort to pin down the concepts. However, Zaccaro and Horn (2003) noted, "Leadership theory has not lived up to its promise of helping practitioners resolve the challenges and problematics that occur in organizational leadership" (p. 769).

According to Buchel and Antunes (2007) the topic of executive development, those involved in the management of our organizations, has been underresearched. They identified a significant gap between the practice of executive development and the research to understand and improve it.

Executives now find themselves in very different organizations and environments from those of 20 or 30 years ago. So if one is responsible for developing executives in organizations, how are they to make sense of the mountain of available data? Researchers

have moved over time from trying to identify common physical traits of leaders and character traits to leader–member exchange theories and complex-systems leadership theories, making it difficult to discern what is really effective. How can one develop executives in organizations without a clear and concise road map? Asking the question "Do we really understand what it takes to develop better leaders?" Nohria and Khurana (2010) in their *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice* concluded, "The current state of scholarly research on leadership doesn't allow us to answer these questions with confidence" (p.3). They called for a broader approach to research on leadership in order to answer the questions that are being asked around the world about leadership.

Where do transformative learning experiences fit in the leadership development process? In addition to the contribution to the narrow line of research in the executive development area, this study more specifically sought to answer a call in the literature to examine transformational executive development programs. In a transformative learning experience, an individual reconsiders taken-for-granted models of how the world is seen and understood and, more particularly in this case, how an individual sees and understands his or her relationship to the environment.

Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009) proposed that "Leader development occurs at multiple levels in an ongoing, dynamic fashion across the lifespan" (p. xiii). What is important is the development of an executive's internal core rather than external observable competencies. A transformative learning experience focused on developing and strengthening that internal core through an examination of personal histories was the focus of this research.

Understanding Transformative Learning

Mezirow (1981, 1991) developed a theory of transformative learning that describes the way adults learn through a process of perspective transformation. In a review of transformative learning, Taylor (1998) indicated, "Although the theory is much discussed, the practice of transformative learning has been minimally investigated and is inadequately defined and poorly understood" (p. vii). Taylor (1998) found that the practice of fostering transformative learning was ideally conceptualized and theoretically based but offered little support from empirical research or practical experience.

Taylor (1998) indicated that the theory of transformative learning and its impact on transformative-learning experiences and on actual learner outcomes was not well understood. This study was structured so that the researcher, given the time that elapsed following the executive-feedback event being studied, gained some understanding of the actual lived outcomes and direct implications stemming from the learning experience.

One common theme that has emerged over time in the leadership literature, even going back to the days of Greek philosophers, is the concept of knowing oneself. To lead others on a journey, understanding self-behavior, perceptions, beliefs, and biases does seem paramount. Leaders of organizations may find themselves in the middle of a merger, a downsizing, tremendous growth, a war, a depression, a fire, a crisis, a tragedy, or perhaps a stable state. The one constant that does not differ in any of these situations is the individual leader. A distinct and deep knowledge of oneself would be instrumental for the leader to navigate through any of these situations.

Several have called for executive development programs to go to a deeper level with the individual in order to make these programs truly transformational (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003; Kets De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Kritskaya & Dirkx, 2000). Kritskaya and Dirkx noted, "To prepare leaders to be able to engage and embrace deep change, leadership development programs need to be fundamentally grounded in the notions of inner work and transformative learning" (p. 1).

Can executives be trained to have more emotional stability, to come to know themselves better? James and Arroba (2005) found that leadership requires the ability to read the inaccessible and hidden aspects of organizational life: "Unconscious emotionality present in the organizational system is not easily accessible because it is primitive emotional terrain that humans are largely uncomfortable with" (p. 304) that is linked to early developmental issues evoked when human beings engage with others in groups or organizations that relate to their lifelong journey of individuation. Further, James and Arroba found,

> It is helpful to increase the awareness of how early authority experiences have impacted on current views of the leadership role and how messages from early life can influence which psychological roles are taken up on behalf of the group. (p. 306)

"Without awareness of difficult emotions that underpin observable behavior, much organization behavior is puzzling" (James & Arroba, 2005, p. 302).

Mezirow (1991) stated, "Most of what we have learned about ourselves has not been examined for unconsciously incorporated assumptions about the stability of our roles, internal prohibitions, or patterns of thought, perception and response" (pp. 87–88). Developing executives seeking to more fully understand themselves and their emotions

may need to look back to their childhood and developmental experiences to clarify their beliefs, perceptions, biases, defenses, and motivations. “Given the anxiety provoking nature of asking people to analyze critically the assumptions by which they habitually live, it is crucial that educators find ways of doing this that are as accessible and nonthreatening as possible” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 180). Mezirow (1991) explained, “Learning to understand our individual historical and biographical situation more fully contributes to the development of autonomy and responsibility in deciding how to define our problems and the course of action that is most appropriate under particular circumstances” (p. 88).

The Executive-Feedback Experience

This research studied an executive-feedback process, designed to develop new executives in a large privately held corporation. This executive-feedback process was described in an internal company memorandum as a “voluntary, comprehensive, time-staff intensive investment in men and women, who are either established leaders or are preparing to enter the leadership ranks.” The purpose of this process is to build a new generation of dynamic executives. The half-day process is administered by a psychologist who uses a series of preliminary tests (detailed in Chapter 3) to develop an understanding of the individual.

The purpose of the executive-feedback process is threefold, according to an internal company memorandum: (a) to provide a marker executive-development experience for individuals, allowing them to interact with their direct supervisor and a senior executive from their division or company; (b) to analyze the individual’s current

management style, impact, and potential through a three-part process that includes psychometric evaluation, a structured interview, and multimember facilitated conversation and feedback; and (c) to develop a set of executive prescriptives that will then serve as an Individual Development Plan.

Statement of the Problem

According to Buchel and Antunes (2007), there are no agreed-upon standards for executive development programs or ways in which to assess these programs, leaving those responsible for executive development in a precarious position. They call for significant research investment into the evaluation of program outcomes, yet often these outcomes are difficult to measure given the lack of availability of business unit performance data. Buchel and Antunes pointed out that for 1956–2007 the Social Sciences Index of the Web of Knowledge gives a count of only 32 papers on the topic of executive education. According to Conger (2010), "Future research is needed to rigorously tease apart the many factors contributing to successful leadership development and to provide a deeper sense of the impact of the individual dimensions" (p. 736). Further, there is a gap between the academic literature on leadership development and leadership development in practice (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003). Zaccaro and Horn stated, "In spite of a long history of leadership research and an even longer interest in leadership practice, the research and practice communities remain too far apart in terms of addressing leadership problems with strong leadership concepts" (p. 799). "Although (in theory) there should be continuity between theory and practice, in practice, that doesn't seem to be the case" (Kets de Vries, 2009, p. x). De Vries described leadership research

and the practical knowledge that helps create more effective organizations as "two ships that pass in the night." (p. xi).

Day et al. (2009) indicated that most of the leadership development practices in use are atheoretical and that despite a pressing need to accelerate leader development, there is no comprehensive theory of leader development. Formal approaches to leadership development have never had the impact that their champions, designers and sponsors aspire to have (Conger, 2010, p. 709). Further, the terms *management, leader, leadership,* and *executive* are often used interchangeably. However, as detailed in Chapter 2 of this study, there are differences between these terms and the focus of this study is on developing executives.

One way in which the subject organization in this study has attempted to accelerate the executive development process is by providing a transformational learning experience focused on individual personal histories. However, in addition to gaps in the literature with regard to a comprehensive theory of executive development, gaps remain in the literature with regard to an understanding of the transformative learning theory developed by Mezirow (1981, 1991). Taylor (2007) noted a need to simply understand the practical way transformative learning happens. Going further, there is a need to understand more clearly the impact of transformative learning on learner outcomes and the way emotions may be engaged in the transformative learning process (Taylor, 2007). This study, with a focus on a transformative executive development program and its outcomes, sought to contribute to the narrow stream of literature on executive development and to a better understanding of transformative learning theory.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences and the perceived outcomes of developing executives who participated in an executive-feedback process using the framework of transformative-learning theory. This was accomplished through the phenomenological research process with in-depth interviews of these executives.

The Research Questions

This research was guided by an overarching research question (Research Question 1) and two subquestions (Research Questions 2 and 3):

1. What is the lived experience of developing executives who progress through a feedback session designed to connect early-childhood and young-adult experiences, beliefs, and marker events to present-day leadership behaviors?
2. In what ways do these developing executives experience this process as transformative?
3. What has been the impact of this executive feedback experience on participants as leaders?

Significance of the Study

This study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the following:

1. A deeper understanding of how the experience of transformative learning actually happens as it relates to executive development would result in an ongoing dialogue and critique of Mezirow's theory, as suggested by Taylor (1997). Taylor (1997) concluded that transformative learning needed to be

explored at a more comprehensive level and that there had been little investigation into the practice of fostering transformative learning.

2. Researchers do not understand the gap between theories of executive leadership and leadership development in practice. “Researchers can help enhance the purposefulness of leadership development by examining how various practices and processes alone and in combination, contribute to better leadership” (Day, 2001, p. 586).
3. Through this study it is expected that the researcher will better understand the impact of transformative learning experiences on learner outcomes, specifically on skills used daily as developing executives apply what has been learned. Findings also could lead to a better understanding of what executives really do and the skills they need to improve performance. This study explored the “greatest opportunity for further research” (Buchel & Antunes, 2007, p. 308) in the leadership development field, which is the assessing of outcomes of executive development programs.
4. Despite much dialogue and writing on the experience of becoming more self-aware, scholarly research studies detailing this in-depth psychologically based executive development process and its advantages, disadvantages, or impact on the organization have been limited. According to Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003),

> the most important lessons that executives can learn are twofold: 1. evaluating the mental models that they hold regarding their capabilities and others expectations of their performance, and 2. how these mental models are expressed in overt or behavioral terms. (p. 76)

> Further, Hogan and Warrenfelz argued, "The most important thing about which managers need to be educated is human nature in general and their own nature in particular" (p. 74).

Conceptual Framework

The study used Mezirow's (1981, 1991) transformative learning theory, specifically perspective transformation, as the framework to examine the executive development process. Transformative learning is

> the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true to guide action. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7)

All adults have developed meaning schemes over their lifetime that "are sets of related and habitual expectations governing if–then, cause–effect, category relationships as well as event sequences" (Mezirow, 1990, p.2). As an example, if coworkers enter into conflict, they may have expectations of the outcome based on how they have experienced conflict in their lives.

These meaning schemes in combination lead to meaning perspectives that are a "structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience during the process of interpretation" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 2). Mezirow (1990) indicated, "Because we are all trapped by our own meaning perspectives, we can never really make interpretations of our experience free of bias. Consequently, our greatest assurance of objectivity comes from exposing an expressed idea to rational and reflective discourse" (p. 10).

The process of perspective transformation leading to transformative learning as described by Mezirow (1978) begins with a disorienting dilemma. The executive-feedback experience at the center of this study was viewed as the disorienting dilemma into which developing executives enter. The researcher's conceptual framework for this study used transformative learning and leadership as the two primary constructs, using Mezirow's (1990) transformative learning theory as the analytical framework. A visual representation of this framework is provided in Figure 1. Transformative learning theory "seeks to explain the way adult learning is structured and to determine by what processes the frames of reference through which we view and interpret our experience (meaning perspectives) are changed or transformed" (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiii). Mezirow (1991) explained that his theory grew

> out of the cognitive revolution in psychology and psychotherapy instigated by scores of studies that have found that it is not so much what happens to people but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, their hopes, their contentment and emotional well-being and their performance. (p. xiii)

Mezirow (1991) described how adult learners are caught in their own histories:

> Parents and mentors, who have an identity investment in their own interpretations and values, define a child's reality, including such fundamentals as ways of recognizing social threat, relating to authority, reacting to rejection and failure, being competitive, role playing, and using time responsibly. (p. 2)

Adults often do not fully understand and cannot see objectively the way these influences affect how they interact and communicate daily. Transformative learning was selected as the framework to examine executive feedback because a primary goal of this executive-development process is to bring into conscious awareness ways in which these childhood

and young-adult influences and marker events impact the individual's belief systems and meaning perspectives.

At the same time, there is recognition of the lack of clear, distinct, and practical ways to develop executives (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003), although executive leadership is a strong predictor of business performance and organizational effectiveness (Day & Lord, 1988). Further, there has been a call for executive leadership-development programs to be truly transformational, meaning that the program will lead to a change in behavior that in turn will lead to more effective personal and organizational behavior (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). Kets de Vries and Korotov indicated that for true learning to occur, these programs need to have an emotional impact.

"In transformative learning, however, we reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to the old experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 11). This executive-feedback process therefore gives the developing executive an opportunity to examine assumed meaning schemes. Bringing these meaning perspectives into conscious awareness (often an emotional experience) provides an opportunity for true behavioral change. In a transformational experience, this change can impact not only the individuals' personal experiences and interactions, but also their professional interactions and impact on others, given their level of authority in the organization.

Ultimately, as reflected in the conceptual framework model in Figure 1, this researcher examined the learner outcomes resulting from this development experience. In summary, the conceptual framework was designed to address the need for further study

of transformational executive-development programs. Given the purpose of the study, it was appropriate to use Mezirow's transformative learning theory as the framework.

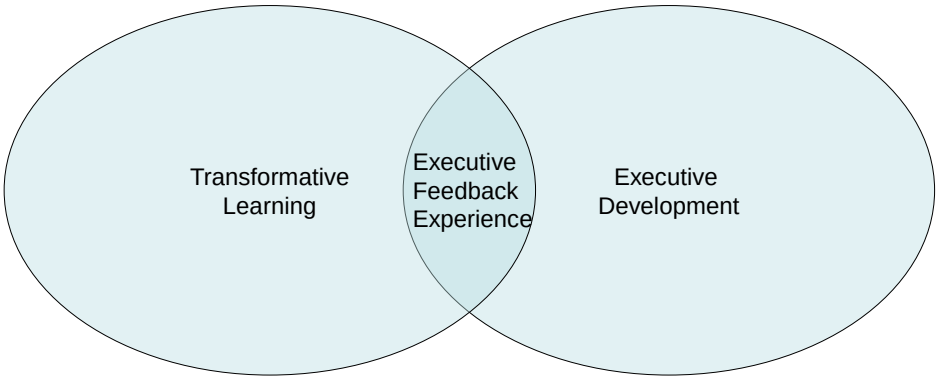

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on the corporate environment and thus is limited in scope and bounded by the nature of corporate organizations rather than educational institutions and governmental organizations. However, the process of developing executives can be considered in the context of all human and organizational relationships. This study employed a phenomenological approach to examine how developing executives experience an intense executive-feedback session and the impact on them as leaders. It is important to note that several participants in the study had an existing relationship with

the psychologist conducting the executive feedback session. This relationship was formed through experiencing other developmental activities within the company.

The phenomenological tradition is not intended to be generalizable. According to Moustakas (1994), the goal of this methodology is to search for meaning and essences of experiences rather than measurements or explanations. Given that the sample used in this study was only 11 developing executives in one particular organization, generalizability is limited. The phenomenological approach is qualitative in nature and therefore did not require the use of quantitative techniques.

Findings apply only to developing executives in this organization. Participants self-reported their experience. Therefore, the study relied on the participants' self-awareness and ability to examine and accurately describe their experience of learning. This study was not focused on training leadership skills; rather, it focused on developing self-awareness in developing executives to better understand themselves and the source of their patterns of behavior and motivations. Although possessing a background in psychology, this researcher is not a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist and therefore did not evaluate or diagnose executives in this study**.** The researcher focused on studying the experience by which executives are developed and the process by which their learning experience may be described as transformative.

Delimitations of the Study

The sample for this study consisted only of employees of one particular corporation based in the Eastern United States. These individuals participated in an executive-feedback session after having risen in the organization to a level where they

were identified as a candidate for this executive-development session. The study focused only on transformative learning related to the experience of this executive development and the perceived outcomes and learning as reported by the participants. Transformative learning related to this executive-development work was focused on life history and significant childhood experiences of the participants. This sample did not include individuals in nonprofit, governmental, or educational institutions and did not include employees who were not considered on an executive-level track within this organization.

Summary of Methodology

This research study was a phenomenological study of the lived experience of executives receiving executive feedback. Mezirow (1981, 1991) developed a theory of transformative learning that describes how adults learn through a process of perspective transformation. This process is described in detail so that one can better understand the impact of the executive-feedback process on the individual and the organization.

This researcher used qualitative interviewing methodology to understand the process by which executives learn through a potentially transformative learning experience. The researcher interviewed the individual executives 6 weeks to 9 months following the learning experience for approximately 90 minutes. For this phenomenological study the researcher used Moustakas's (1994) method of analysis of the data, ultimately developing a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experiences for the group from the individual textural and individual structural descriptions.

Eleven individuals who recently had completed the executive-feedback experience within one particular private for profit enterprise located in the Eastern United States were participants in this study. The data gathered in these interviews were subjected to an extensive coding and clustering (Creswell, 1998) process and then interpreted by this researcher.

Definitions of Key Terms

Executive. Those professionals engaged in the management of organizations (Buchel & Antunes, 2007).

Executive development. A process that leads "to superior individual and organizational performance and increased competitiveness for the organization as well as helping directors (executives) become more professional in their duties" (Jackson, Farndale, & Kakabadse, 2003, p. 187). Examples of executive development programs include executive master's of business administration offerings, custom-made executive programs including outdoor experiences, and transformational learning programs (Buchel & Antunes, 2007).

Executive feedback. According to an internal company memorandum from 2000, a "voluntary, comprehensive, time–staff intensive investment in men and women, who are either established leaders or are preparing to enter the leadership ranks" with the purpose of this process being "to build a new generation of dynamic executives."

Leadership. "The process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives" (Yukl, 2002, p. 7).

Perspective transformation. According to Mezirow (1991),

> The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Transformative learning. According to Mezirow (2000),

> The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true to guide action. (p. 7)

Structure of the Dissertation

Following Chapter 1, Chapter 2 contains the Literature Review portion, which focuses on the overall constructs of learning and leadership. Further review of the research on executive development and executive feedback is also provided in Chapter 2. Chapter 3, the methodology section, details the structure of the research methods used for this study. In Chapter 4, results from the study are presented along with themes developed from the research study. Finally, Chapter 5 presents conclusions and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a thorough review of the literature relating to the main constructs of adult learning and leadership and then more specifically details transformative learning theory and leadership and executive development. The literature search process was conducted online using the following resources: ABI/Inform, PsychInfo, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest. The search initially involved *learning, leader,* and *leadership* and eventually was narrowed to *transformational learning, executive development,* and *executive leaders.*

Adult Learning

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) stated, "Learning is a personal process. . . [The] context of adult life and societal context shape what an adult wants to learn, and to some lesser extent when and where learning is to take place" (p. 1). For adults, significant learning often takes place through experiences outside of the classroom, often through significant life-impacting experiences. "Adult learning is multidimensional and involves learning to control the environment, to understand meaning as we communicate with others, and to understand ourselves" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 89).

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), adult learning occurs primarily in three settings: (a) formal settings such as traditional classroom settings, (b) nonformal settings based on educating individuals in a community on an issue or skill related to social actions, and (c) informal or self-directed settings where the individual learns in a natural setting and the learning is often driven by the individual. Merriam and Caffarella

also detailed five learning "orientations that present very different assumptions" (p. 250): (a) behaviorist, (b) cognitivist, (c) humanist, (d) social learning, and (e) constructivist.

In behaviorism the focus for learning is on the environment and how it shapes an individual's behavior. Behaviorism was originally developed by John B. Watson (as cited in Merrian & Cafferella, 1999).

In contrast to the behaviorist orientation, which is primarily interested in external stimuli, the cognitivist orientation developed by Gestalt psychologists is interested in how the learner internally processes an event to gain insight. "Learning involves the reorganization of experiences in order to make sense of stimuli from the environment" (Merrian & Cafferella, 1999, p. 254). Their assumptions are based on the human mind's ability to produce knowledge and insights through information processing and memory retention.

The humanist view broadened the concept of adult learning by incorporating both affective and cognitive needs as prerequisites for fulfilling the learning potential of the individual as a whole person. The relationship between learners and their environment is characterized by "the emphasis on human nature, human potential, human emotions and affect" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 265), with the major theorists being Maslow and Rogers.

Social learning theory "combines both elements from behaviorist and cognitivist orientations and posits that people learn from observing others" (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 258). It emphasizes the importance of an individual observing his or her environment and the learning that results. Therefore, individuals acquire knowledge

through modeling, mentoring, experimenting, and interventions that increase people's self-efficacy (Bandura, as cited in Merriam & Cafarella, 1999).

Finally, according to the constructivist perspective, "learning is a process of constructing meaning" and refers to "how people make sense of their experience" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 261). Major theorists include Candy, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky.

Schwandt (2005) described the progression of these adult-learning theories as a shift in four areas of cognition:

1. "The nature of knowledge is no longer considered singular; it varies from the concrete instrumental or technical to the understanding of subjective assumptions and premises associated with social norms and the cultural context of actions (communicative and emancipatory knowledge)" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 181).
2. "The relationship between human learning and action is no longer seen as simply sequential; rather the two are seen as symbiotic, in that they are both requisite for and mutually dependent on one another for the creation of knowledge" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 181).
3. "Learning is no longer considered a solitary and periodic human event; rather it is continuously occurring in and through a milieu of dynamic social variables that are directed at continuous meaning making" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 181).
4. "Individual (and collective) reflection has shifted from a simple response to stimuli, or a step in the problem-solving process, to the fundamental

> introspective process required for change to occur in basic assumptions, premises, and sensemaking frameworks" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 181).

Transformative learning. A prominent social-constructivist theorist, Mezirow developed transformative learning theory from his 1978 research study of women who had decided to return to higher education following raising families. In this research he detailed the experiences of women in college re-entry programs. Mezirow (1981) revealed that the "existential challenges of adulthood involves a process of negotiating a succession of transformations in 'meaning perspective'" (p. 6).

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, based on the constructivist perspective, has roots in Habermas's (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action. Habermas (1984) posed three learning domains and made a distinction between the three. Instrumental learning is "learning to control and manipulate the environment" and involves "determining cause-effect relationships and learning through task oriented problems," whereas communicative "learning involves learning to understand others" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 73).

> Most significant learning in adulthood falls into this category because it involves understanding, describing and explaining intentions; values; ideals; moral issues; social, political, psychological or educational concepts; and feelings and reasons. In communicative learning the learner actively and purposefully negotiates his or her way through a series of specific encounters by using language and gesture and by anticipating the actions of others. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 79)

The focus is "increasing insight and attaining common ground through symbolic interaction" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 80).

Habermas's third learning domain is emancipatory, which "involves an interest in self knowledge, that is, the knowledge of self reflection, including interest in the way

one's history and biography has expressed itself in the way one sees oneself, one's roles and social expectations" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 5). According to Mezirow (1991), "Emancipatory learning often is transformative" (p. 88).

The theory of transformative learning has been studied and modified over time to explain how adults make meaning. Mezirow (1991) defined learning as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 12). The specific constructivist assumptions that underlie this theory "include a conviction that meaning exists within ourselves rather than in external forms and that personal meanings that we attribute to our experience are acquired and validated through human interaction and communication" (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiv).

> Transformative learning involves an enhanced level of awareness of context of one's beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, an assessment of alternate perspectives, a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new, an ability to take action based on the new perspective, and a desire to fit the new perspective into the broader context of one's life. (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 160–161)

Transformative learning refers to

> a process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of the mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7–8)

Mezirow (2000) further explained, "Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess the reasons justifying these assumptions and making action decisions based on the resulting insight" (p. 8). Adults "transform their frames of reference by becoming critically

reflective of our assumptions and aware of their context, the source, nature, and consequences of our taken for granted beliefs" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19).

Adults reflect, then, on beliefs and perspectives that no longer work. This process of subjective reframing can be a threatening experience because what one had held true may come into question. This process can change not only the way people see the world, but also their relationships and the way that adults interact with others. According to Mezirow (1994), "Transformation Theory is intended to be a comprehensive, idealized and universal model consisting of the generic structures, elements and processes of adult learning" (p. 222).

Transformative learning—The process. Each adult has developed meaning schemes over his or her lifetime that are "made up of specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that constitute interpretations of experience" (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 6–7). For instance, it would be expected to take less time to get somewhere running as opposed to walking. These meaning schemes in combination lead to meaning perspectives, which are "broad sets of predispositions resulting from psychocultural assumptions, which determine the horizons of our expectations" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 223). Mezirow (1990) indicated, "Because we are all trapped by our own meaning perspectives that we can never really make interpretations of our experience free of bias" (p. 10).

The process of perspective transformation leading to transformative learning as described by Mezirow (1978) begins with a disorienting dilemma, as described above. Mezirow (1981) identified 10 phases in transformative learning: (a) a disorienting dilemma; (b) self-examination with guilt or shame; (c) a critical assessment of epistemic,

sociocultural, or psychic assumptions; (d) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change; (e) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; (f) planning a course of action; (g) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; (h) provisional trying of new roles; (i) building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and (j) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

Frames of reference in transformative learning. According to Mezirow (2000),

> A frame of reference is a meaning perspective, the structure of assumptions or expectations through which we filter sense impressions involving cognitive, and affective and conative dimensions. These frames of reference selectively delimit perceptions, feelings, cognitions, and dispositions by predisposing individual's intentions expectations and purposes. They provide the context for making meaning within which we choose what and how a sensory experience is to be construed and or appropriated. (p. 16)

Further, Mezirow (2000) explained, "A frame of reference is composed of two dimensions; a habit of mind and resulting points of view" (p. 17). Examples of these would include religious and political beliefs, and social and moral norms.

> Meaning schemes commonly operate outside of one's awareness. . . . Because individual's values and sense of self are anchored in their frames of reference they provide each individual with a sense of stability, coherence, and identity. Consequently they are often emotionally charged and strongly defended. Viewpoints that call frames of reference into question may be dismissed as ill intentioned or crazy. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18)

Reflection. "Our meaning structures are transformed through reflection," defined by Mezirow (1994) as "attending to the grounds (justification) for one's beliefs" (p. 223). When these beliefs are not working or certain ways of functioning are no longer functioning, one begins to examine and reflect upon these meaning structures. The

disorienting dilemma triggers this reflection. Further "reflection involves a critique of assumptions to determine whether the belief, often acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood, remains functional for us as adults" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 223)

According to Mezirow (1994), "We may reflect on the content of the problem, the process of problem solving, or the premise of the problem" (p. 224). The most significant learning takes place upon premise reflection and can transform meaning perspectives. "The most significant learning involves critical premise reflection of premises about oneself" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 224). This study of the executive-feedback process was expected to involve this critical premise reflection and therefore could result in significant learning for the participant. Mezirow (1998) made an important distinction between reflection and critical reflection in that critical reflection refers to " a critique of a premise" whereas reflection "does not necessarily imply making an assessment of what is being reflected upon" (p. 2).

Discourse. Individuals proceed through three primary stages of transformative learning, according to Mezirow (2000): (a) reflection, (b) discourse, and (c) action (see Figure 2). Transformative learning "involves the participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Discourse in the context of transformative theory is "that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 10-11). Discourse, Mezirow (2000) explained, "is not based on winning arguments, it centrally involves finding agreement welcoming difference,

trying on other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis and reframing" (p. 13). Mezirow (1994) described an idealized set of conditions for discourse to take place:

> A participant in discourse will (a) have accurate and complete information, (b) be free from coercion and distorting self deception, (c) be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively, (d) be open to alternative points of view and care about the way others think and feel, (e) be able to become critically reflective of assumptions and their consequences, (f) have equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse (g) be willing to accept informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are encountered, and are subsequently established through discourse as yielding better judgments. (p. 225)

Strategies for experiencing transformation. One of the strategies for helping individuals experience perspective transformation is exploration of an individual's critical incidents. These are defined as "brief written descriptions by learners of significant events in their lines" (Brookfield, 1990, p. 179). Through the examination of these critical incidents, an educator, third party, or even the individual can probe the set of assumptions. The value of this process is two-fold: The individual's experience represents sources of data, giving insight into the learner's assumptions, and the critical incident exercise is less threatening than asking learners to respond to general questions.

Another recommendation related to the process of becoming more critically self-reflective is keeping a journal to aid the ongoing process of bringing together the outer and the inner parts of an individual's lives (Lukinsky, 1990). Diary writing is an old form of self-expression and reflection where one can express feelings, fantasies, thoughts, and dreams when no other outlets are available. This journaling process is of special importance if the author knows that there will be no other readers of this material.

Lukinsky (1990) suggested using the journal as a way to "help adults break habitual modes of thinking" and "bring together the inner and outer parts of our lives" (p. 213). "It is through discourse that one attempts to understand what is valid in the assertions made by others and attempts to achieve consensual validation for our own assertions" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 354). It is important to remember that learning does not occur without the individual taking action upon this emancipatory learning, even if insight comes from reflective discourse. In transformation theory, action "means making a decision, not necessarily an immediate behavior change" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 226).

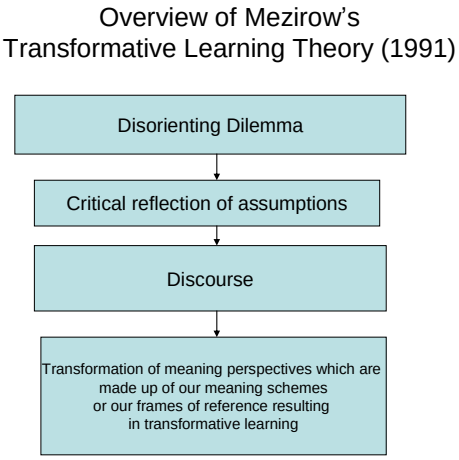

Figure 2. Mezirow's transformative learning theory.

A review of transformative learning research. Taylor completed two significant literature reviews of studies involving transformative learning theory as the primary construct. Taylor (1997) explored seven unresolved issues related to

transformative learning theory: (a) individual change versus social action, (b) a decontextualized view of learning, (c) a universal model of adult learning, (d) adult development shift or progression, (e) rationality, (f) other ways of knowing, and (g) the model of perspective transformation. Taylor (2007) concluded that transformative learning theory

> needs to give greater attention to the role of context, the varying nature of the catalysts of transformative learning, the increased role of other ways of knowing, and the importance of relationships and an overall broadening of the definitional outcome of a perspective transformation. (p. 174)

Taylor (1997) found that most authors of studies on transformative learning, including Mezirow, have not sufficiently explored the process of fostering learning. He maintained that Mezirow's theory does not adequately address the deep emotional component or the need to resolve life issues from the individual's past. Taylor (1998) pointed out, "Although the theory is much discussed, the practice of transformative learning has been minimally investigated and is inadequately defined and poorly understood" (p. vii). With regard to adult development, shift or progression has to do with Mezirow's position that perspective transformation parallels adult development. Mezirow (1994) described "two different paths toward transformation, one cumulative, a set of progressive transformations related to meaning schemes, and the other epochal" (pp. 229–230).

Neuman (1996) found that when individuals had a willingness to explore their feelings, changes in meaning structures were more likely to result: "When current affect was incorporated into reflective processing, it often produced clues and insights for directing reflections focus toward the more fundamental or assumptive basis underlying

meaning structures and perspective" (p. 462). "It is our very emotions and feelings that not only provide the impetus for us to reflect critically but often provide the material on which to reflect deeply" (Taylor, 1998, p. 57).

In 2007 Taylor published another review of 41 studies involving transformative learning published in peer-reviewed journals. Taylor (2007) found that increasingly studies were about "fostering transformative learning and the complex nature of critical reflection, relationships, the nature of perspective transformation and the role of context" (p. 173). "Transformative learning offers a theory that is uniquely adult, abstract and idealized, grounded in the nature of human communication" (Taylor, 2007, p. 173). He indicated "one of the most powerful tools for fostering transformative learning is providing students with learning experiences that are direct, personally engaging and stimulate reflection upon experience" (p. 182). Taylor (2007) found that the focus of these studies moved more to understanding the way in which the transformative experience could be fostered in the educational setting and seeking a better understanding of the transformative experience. Finally, Taylor (2009) identified six elements that are essential components for the transformative process: (a) individual experience, (b) critical reflection, (c) dialogue, (d) a holistic orientation, (e) awareness of context, and (f) an authentic practice.

Boyd's theory of transformational learning. Although Mezirow receives the majority of attention with regard to transformative learning, another model deserves attention, according to Taylor (1997). Boyd's model, which is founded on Carl Jung's work, focuses on an individual's life journey and the quest for individuation. Boyd

(1989) focused much of his work on group behavior and defined transformation as "a fundamental change in one's personality involving conjointly the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (p. 459). Taylor (1997) compared Mezirow and Boyd; whereas Mezirow's view may be more focused on individuals' beliefs and reconciling those beliefs and perspectives with the culture, much of Boyd's perspective centers on in-depth psychology and the unconscious, following in the footsteps of Jung. Given the nature of the current study, although Mezirow's theory was the focus it was important to include Boyd's perspective because of the potentially emotionally laden nature of the executive-feedback session and the in-depth experience of the session.

Leadership

The history of leadership theory. According to Bennis (1959), "Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for the top nomination. And ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any topic in the behavioral sciences" (pp. 259–301). Almost 50 years later Bennis (2007) wrote,

> To this day, psychologists have not sorted out which traits define leaders or whether leadership exists outside of specific situations, and yet we know with absolute certainty that a handful of people have changed millions of lives and reshaped the world. (p. 3)

Nohria and Khurana (2010) discussed how leadership is "an elusive construct riddled with ambiguity" and that much of the "demand for insights about leadership has only increased over time and has largely been met by popular writers" and therefore "seldom conforms to the norms of the scientific method" and "is rarely grounded in any

well established theoretical tradition" (p.5). Goethals and Sorenson (2006) pointed out the challenge associated with the development of a unified comprehensive theory of leadership versus the development of several leadership theories existing on different paradigms, and pointed out that just as no one theory of religion exists perhaps no one theory of leadership should exist.

Although thousands of research studies have been performed over the years, leading to many theories of leadership, this section highlights the primary theories that have dominated the literature over the past 100 years. Northouse (2004) defined leadership as a "process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3) and viewed leadership as a transactional event. Northouse wrote, "Both leaders and followers are involved together in the leadership process" (p. 3). Yukl (2002) defined leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives" (p. 7).

Leadership research from 1900–1945 was primarily involved with identifying traits that great leaders were born with, and it was assumed that examining these personal characteristics that effective leaders possessed would unlock the secret to leadership (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). The theories developed during this time are referred to as "great man theories" (Northouse, 2004, p. 15). Stogdill (1948) conducted a meta-analysis to cross analyze numerous leadership studies, ultimately concluding that the prevalent trait paradigms needed to be reconsidered. Stogdill revised the view of leadership to be more relationship oriented in a social situation. An important distinction, in this

progression through a brief review of leadership theory, is that the individual is the focus of trait theories with little regard for the follower characteristics or the follower relationship.

The behavior of leaders. What followed this emphasis on leader traits was a focus on the behavior and skills of leaders. "If it's not who they are, Stogdill's logic went, maybe it's what they do" (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003, p. 19). According to Northouse (2004), the shift from personality characteristics to a skills approach started with R. L. Katz's (1955) article describing leadership as a set of developable skills. R. L. Katz identified three basic personal skills for effective administration: (a) technical, (b) human, and (c) conceptual. Simply put, technical skills relate to having the knowledge to perform a certain job, human skills refer to an individual's ability to work with another, and conceptual skills relate to one's ability to work conceptual thoughts and ideas. R. L. Katz's work and that of Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Owen Jacobs, and Fleishman (2000) relate to a skills-based model of leadership and suggest that at lower levels of management it is most important that the manager or supervisor possess technical and human skills. When promoted to middle management, the human skills become most important. Finally, at the executive level, the conceptual skills are most critical.

Style, relational, and contingency theories of leadership. The style approach to leadership "emphasizes the behavior of the leader" and "focuses exclusively on what leaders do and how they act" (Northouse, 2004, p. 65). With this leadership approach it is important for a leader to find the right behavior, either relational or task, that is appropriate for a given situation.

The contingency theory of leadership, developed by Fiedler (1964, 1967), called for the leader to match the situation or culture. The leader's success is contingent upon this fit. The relational theory of leadership was based on vertical dyad linkage theory and has evolved into leader–member exchange theory, according to Northouse (2004). The leader–member exchange theory stresses that the outcome is a direct correlation and function of the relationship existing between the manager and his or her employees. The more positive the relationship, the more effective the organization posits the theory.

Transformational and transactional leadership. Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) emphasized the ability of leaders to identify and use the motives of the followers to best achieve the mission of the organization and of the individual leader. Burns distinguished transformational leadership from transactional leadership in that transformational leadership taps into followers' motives, whereas transactional exchanges are really based on an agreement that there will be a reward in return for the task that the follower completes. For instance, a promotion may be given in return for high performance.

House (1976) developed the theory of charismatic leadership, which was similar to transformational leadership theory in that leaders were seen as being able to influence followers through distinct charismatic attributes of their personality. Charismatic leaders communicate confidence in their followers' ability to meet their high expectations, which leads in turn to enhanced follower self-esteem. House maintained that charismatic leaders arouse followers through emotions or motives to mission goals more than leaders who do not exhibit a charismatic effect. Conger and Kanungo (1998) proposed a behavioral

model positing that the perceptions of the followers and their assigning certain attributes to a leader lead to charismatic leader qualities.

Bass (1985) extended the work of Burns (1978) and House (1976) by providing a greater focus on the followers rather than the leader's needs and placing transactional and transformational leadership on a single continuum. The three significant ways Bass (1985) expanded upon Burns theory are as follows: Bass (a) made it explicit that transformational leaders have the ability to increase follower's wants; (b) viewed transformational leadership occurring in both positive and negative outcomes, not just positive as detailed by Burns; and (c) put transactional leadership and transformational leadership on the same continuum.

The psychodynamic approach to leadership. The psychodynamic approach to leadership has as its foundational assumptions that leaders are more effective if they can gain insight into themselves and if they can understand the psychological make-up of their subordinates. Further, no one particular personality type is more effective since the knowledge of self and others are the essential components. The roots of this approach are founded in the work of Freud (1938) and Jung (1923). Emphasis is placed on the family of origin, maternal and paternal influences, transference, and personality types.

According to Stech (2004), the strengths of the psychodynamic approach include the emphasis on the need for insight, the analysis of the relationship between the leader and the follower, the basis in the universality of our human existence, and the results of this approach can often impact not only the leader's work life but can also lead to an improved personal and home life. Weaknesses or criticisms of the psychodynamic

approach include that this information is often subjective, has its origins in the study of individuals with deeply rooted issues, often does not take into account organizational factors, and does not lend itself to conventional training methodologies.

With a focus on gaining insight into the relationship between the leader and the follower Goleman (1998) defined emotional intelligence as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (p. 317) and further "managing feelings so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothly toward their common goals" (p.7). He indicated that individuals are not born with emotional intelligence, rather it is learned over time throughout life. The framework for emotional intelligence includes self awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

Distributed and complex leadership. More recent leadership theories, including distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003), and complexity leadership (Marion & Uhl Bien, 2001), have moved away from the focus on the individual or the individual and the follower to a view of the leader set in the context or environment of the system as a whole. According to distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006), the importance of leadership existing throughout the organization is stressed; for instance, in a school a system of leaders throughout the organization influence the body. Pearce and Conger (2003) defined shared leadership as

> a dynamic influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence. (p. 1)

Organizations are seen here as coalitions, networks, and strategic alliances.

Marion and Uhl Bien (2001) introduced the term *complex leadership* and emphasized that leaders learn to "manipulate situations of complexity" (p. 403). "Complex adaptive systems are composed of a diversity of agents that interact with each other, mutually affect each other, and in so doing generate novel behavior for the system as a whole" (Regine & Lewin, 2000, p. 6). According to Marion and Uhl Bien, leaders in a complex system "need to leave the system alone to generate positive emergence, yet still provide general control to keep the system generally focused to maintain—and further enable its complex structure" (p. 403).

In order for a leader to succeed, he or she needs to understand how to catalyze (as opposed to create) the organizational environments. According to Regine and Lewin (2000), leaders need to foster open communication, unleash human potential, embrace change, work with people where they are, see the organization in its wholeness, create chaos in varying degrees by disrupting existing patterns, attend to nonlinear relationships, see people with greater depth and place a value on authenticity. Further, they stressed that leaders should not feel pressured to have all of the answers but give up the illusion of control and embrace the paradoxical nature of their position. Chatman and Kennedy argued that the three critical capabilities for leaders are their "diagnostic capabilities, the breadth and flexibility of his (or her) behavioral repertoire, and his (or her) understanding of the leadership paradox" (2010, p. 161), with the leadership paradox being that success is achieved through others.

The review of leadership literature over time has given rise to dualities related to the nature of leadership. Nohria and Khurana (2010) assembled a series of essays from prominent leadership researchers that point to these five dualities that exists for research on leadership: (a). the drive for superior results and the need for making meaning, (b). the leader as the special person and the leader in a social role, (c). leadership as being universal as opposed to leadership being particular, (d). the leader exercising agency and the leader's need to attend to constraints, (e). thinking of leader development emphasizing the capacity for thinking and doing vs. becoming and being. In summary, there has been a progression and refining of leadership theories over the past 100 years; however, the literature reveals a lack of agreement among theorists. For those operating in organizational environments, especially executives and those responsible for the development of executives, this lack of theoretical consensus has resulted in an unclear path to developing and executing what would be described as effective executive leadership.

Leadership versus management. It is important to look briefly at the distinction between management and leadership, although certainly given the dialogue in the literature this discussion could extend for several pages. However, a brief distinction will help the reader to understand the nuance of the dialogue.

There have been extensive writings on both leadership and management. "Unfortunately a diverse array of conceptualizations and understandings concerning management and leadership exist within academia, empirical research, and in the workplace; thus it has been very difficult to add collectively to the overall knowledge on

this subject" (Kotterman, 2006, p. 14). Kotterman noted, "Management is a fairly new phenomenon" driven by "the emergence of large, complex organizations" in need of "a system to regulate work and deal with authority and control issues" (p. 13).

Currier (2003) argued that in today's environment there are times when leaders must manage and times when managers must lead. Yukl and Lepsinger (2005) stressed that leading and managing are important when carrying out the efforts of the organization: "Management programs and systems can enhance the effects of direct leadership behaviors" (p. 364).

Zaleznik (2004) argued that leaders and managers are really two different types of individuals; conditions conducive to the growth of one may not be conducive to the growth of the other. Where management is a function of rationality and control driven by narrowing organizational goals under a reward-for-performance model, leaders may need to be the model of acting and learning for the organization and may create chaotic environments, as opposed to the more structured environments comfortable to managers. Zaleznik argued that managers do not make much of an emotional investment in the work, whereas leaders invest in intuitive and empathetic ways.

Leadership Development

"Leadership theory has not lived up to its promise of helping practitioners resolve the challenges and problematics that occur in organizational leadership" (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003, p. 769). Zaccaro and Horn continued, "While current leadership theories have grown in sophistication and breadth they have not translated into a comparable range of effective practices" (p. 770). Herein lies the problem for those tasked with

developing leaders within organizations. Reading the literature from leadership theorists and from those who practice leadership development demonstrates a great divide. One thing that is clear is that no one answer exists. “One of the biggest challenges facing organizations is reversing a tendency that allows leadership development to become a haphazard process” (Conger, 1993, p. 46). This then leads to a lack of intentionality, accountability, and evaluation (Day, 2000). According to Conger (2010), the best leadership development programs “are designed around an understanding that leadership development is a continuous, lifelong process rather than a single event or program.” (p. 713).

In identifying the difference between leader development and leadership development McCauley and Van Velsor (2004) defined leader development as “the expansion of a person’s capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes” (p. 22). McCauley and Van Velsor defined leadership development as “the expansion of an organization’s capacity to enact the basic leadership tasks needed for collective work: setting direction, creating alignment, and maintaining commitment” (p. 18). Day (2000) defined leadership development as “an integration strategy by helping people understand how to relate to others, to coordinate their efforts, build commitments, and develop social networks by applying self understanding to social and organizational imperatives” (p. 584).

Day (2000) identified the most popular practices for developing leaders. The first is the 360-degree feedback process, whose “growing popularity may have something to do with a deeper appreciation for the business necessity of self understanding” (p. 589).

He proposed that the effectiveness of this process is only successful to the extent that some level of coaching follows the experience.

The second practice Day (2000) identified is executive coaching, which "is comprehensive in terms of integrating assessment, challenge and support in the name of development, especially when linked with the 360 degree feedback" (p. 591). The third practice is mentoring, and the fourth is networking programs designed to allow executives to meet with and exchange views. The fifth practice is various job assignments, although Day noted "they often lack the kind of intentionality in terms of implementation and follow up to be confident in understanding the amount and type of development that has occurred" (p. 600). The last process identified by Day is action learning, a "continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with a corresponding emphasis on getting things done" (p. 601). According to Day, the success of development practices within organizations is not necessarily a function of the practices themselves, but rather of the level of consistency and intentionality of the implementation, the introduction of leadership development throughout the organization, and connecting the development practices from level to level within the organization.

McCauley and Van Velsor (2004) proposed three "key drivers of leader development": (a) assessment, (b) challenge, and (c) support (p. 5). Assessment begins with the identification of the difference between the current self and the ideal self. This identification process can come from many sources, including coworkers, spouses, performance evaluations, coaches, and even the individual through journaling or reflection. Challenge refers to the importance of experiences that "require new skills and

new ways of understanding oneself in relation to others" (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004, p. 8). These challenging experiences can involve conflict, losses, failures, new assignments, or difficult goals. Support though this development can come from a variety of sources, such as friends, coworkers, and coaches.

McCauley and Van Velsor (2004) concluded that development comes from a variety of experiences, with the lessons learned involving new skills, values, abilities, and knowledge. They categorized these as self-management, social, and work-facilitation capabilities. McCauley and Van Velsor proposed that a comprehensive leader development program needs to "1) create a variety of rich developmental experiences that provide assessment, challenge, and support, 2) enhance people's ability to learn from the experience, and 3) use an approach that integrates various developmental experiences" (p. 16).

Because individuals begin the leadership journey at different times in their lives and with different levels and types of experiences, there cannot be one way to develop leaders. However, this researcher is interested in understanding the learning and impact on executives resulting from an examination of their life histories and their childhood experiences. Avolio (2005) called this one's "life stream," which he defined as "the events that one accumulates from birth to the present that shape how you choose to influence others and yourself" (p. 12).

Ultimately leaders need to "peel back the layers of self deception to reveal how inner personality—largely hard wired since early childhood—affects the way in which they lead and manage others" (Kets De Vries, 2006, p. xvii). Kets De Vries (2001a)

indicated that the ultimate goal for the development of authenticity and congruence within the life of an individual is the match between the subjective and the social world—"the search for balance between inner and outer reality" (p. 107). This is important for leaders because leaders help to organize and create the culture for organizations (Schein, 1985).

Shamir and Eilam (2005) suggested that by having leaders focus on their life stories, becoming more self-aware, they will become more authentic to their followers, more congruent. They pointed out that research on leadership from a life-story point of view is scarce. Turner and Mavin (2008) concurred: "Leadership research often overlooks subjective experiences of a leader's life story" (p. 378). Avolio and Luthens (2006) sought to facilitate or accelerate the reader's life program by augmenting it with authentic leadership development practices. Avolio and Luthens referred to "moments that matter" as opportunities for the leader to reflect and learn about the self through the experience of these critical incidents. These could be either positive or negative experiences. Ibarra, Snook, and Guillen Ramo (2010) argued that "the development of leadership skills is inextricably integrated with the development of the person's self concept" (p. 658) and concluded that the leadership development process is ultimately about "facilitating an identity transition" (p. 673).

Executive Leadership

Although much has been written in the popular press about executive leadership, little is based upon true research. According to Zaccaro (2001), this leaves several questions unanswered related to what is really known about executive leaders, their

attributes, and their influence on the organization. According to Mumford, Baughman, Uhlman, Costanza, and Threlfall (1993), the way leaders solve problems and exert influence is different at various organizational levels. D. Katz and Kahn (1978) proposed three patterns to leadership within organizations that are a function of the level of the organization in which the leader finds him or herself. Central to the theme of executive leadership research is the concept of coordinating efforts to move the organization toward a common purpose. A central distinction between junior and senior level leaders proposed by D. Katz and Kahn is that junior leaders are concerned mainly with the activities in their subunit and the relationship of that subunit to the organization, whereas the senior leader is concerned with the coordination of the subunits and the organization's relationship to the environment. Further, "at an organizational level, leaders serve as embodiments of the organizations they create and lead" (Chatman & Kennedy, 2010, p. 169).

Several theories of executive leadership have been put forth in an attempt to capture the essence of the executive position. Zaccaro (2001) has broken down these models into four major conceptual perspectives: (a) conceptual complexity models, (b) behavioral complexity models, (c) strategic decision-making models, and (d) visionary or inspirational leadership. Conceptual complexity models emphasize the complex nature of the position, the environment, and the decisions that leaders are called to make. Behavioral complexity theories involve the various roles required by executive leaders given the varied demands from the number of stakeholder groups. Strategic decision-making theories posit that "organizational effectiveness emerges from an appropriate fit

between the organization and its environment" (Zaccaro, 2001, p. 17). Finally, in visionary models leaders create a vision and then organize and empower subordinates to effectively achieve that vision. If all of these theories are accurate in some way, the question still remains as to how to develop an individual in order to meet the complex demands of the executive leader position.

Executive Development

The role of the executive today is complex and paradoxical in many ways. The organizational environments in which executives find themselves call for them to be continually open to adaptive change and learning. One of the paradoxical issues facing executive development is that people in positions of power—whose ongoing development should be considered extremely important given the changing nature of the environment—are much more likely than their subordinates to find excuses not to engage in personal work that is emotionally painful (Kets De Vries, 2006).

According to Jackson et al. (2003), no definitive work exists on the nature and growth of executive development. The most commonly stated reason for not understanding development is a lack of time, with the second being that individuals already have developed themselves sufficiently (Jackson et al., 2003). A change takes place when leaders are elevated into the top position, as relationships take on different dimensions than they did before and every move "has a great deal of symbolism attached to it" (Kets De Vries, 1994, p. 81).

According to Buchel and Antunes (2007), executive development programs come in many different forms, including executive MBA programs, which are distinct and set

apart from traditional MBA programs; custom designed programs; and transformational education programs. Unfortunately, there are no agreed upon standards for these programs and little has been written about them or their outcomes. This creates a need to "learn about executive learning" (Buchel & Antunes, 2007, p. 305) and more specifically about its outcomes.

The challenge of developing executives. In their study of executive-level managers, Kaplan, Drath, and Kofodimos (1987) looked at the self-development process and the leader's willingness to deal with performance deficits, such as susceptibility to let power and position go to one's head. Kaplan et al. identified five obstacles to self-development and learning collectively called "elevation": (a) power, (b) success, (c) expertise, (d) ambition, and (e) competence.

Kaplan et al. (1987) found that executives receive little feedback with regard to how they perform their job because of the their demeanor, impact, isolation, and autonomy. Executives do gain feedback through introspection, a necessary step in the self-development process. However, the demands on executives' time limit the time available for introspection. According to Kaplan et al., "Executives who do not see a connection between introspection and performance are understandably unwilling to give the time and energy that looking inward requires" (p. 200). Because executives want to build and maintain their reputation for knowing what they are doing, many develop thick skin impervious to criticism.

Kaplan et al. (1987) recommended, as did Vaill (1988), that these leaders be continual learners, including self-learning. Kaplan et al. stated,

> The executive whose power, impact, access to resources, experience and skill, wealth, and success all work to set him above most of his fellow humans and grant him the means to influence and accomplish great things, may find more difficulty than most in knowing himself and he is constrained by his condition from the fullest development of his capabilities. . . . Self development for executives is a frontier worth developing. (p. 203)

Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) argued, "The most important thing about which managers need to be educated is human nature in general and their own particular nature in particular" (p. 74). They continued, "The most important lessons that executives can learn are twofold: (1) evaluating the mental models that they hold regarding their capabilities and others expectations of their performance; and (2) how these mental models are expressed in overt or behavioral terms" (p. 76).

A development model for executives. Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) proposed three metamotives in human life:

> At a deep and often unconscious level, people need (1) acceptance and approval (and are stressed by rejection and criticism); (2) Status, power, and the control of resources (and are stressed by their loss); and (3) predictability and order (and are stressed by their loss). (p. 77)

Therefore, Hogan and Warrenfelz concluded, "The most consequential learning in life is organized around gaining acceptance and approval (or avoiding rejection) gaining status, power and resource control (or minimizing their loss) and making sense of the world" (p. 78).

Hogan and Warrenfelz (2003) proposed a model organizing four competency domains: (a) intrapersonal skills, (b) interpersonal skills, (c) leadership skills, and (d) business skills. These competencies are hierarchical, with business skills being easiest to learn and to teach and intrapersonal skills the most difficult. Additionally, one's ability to develop the later skills is a function of the degree to which one has been able to develop

earlier skills. According to Hogan and Warrenfeltz, intrapersonal skills (which can be measured) have to do with self-esteem, emotional security, resiliency, attitudes toward authority, and self-control. Interpersonal skills involve taking the role of the other, anticipating other expectations, and incorporating those behaviors into one's actions. Leadership skills involve building and maintaining effective teams, specifically being able to recruit and retain talented personnel, motivate a team, and promote a vision for the team. Business skills are the easiest to teach, are the most cognitive, and rely the least on one's ability to deal with others. These "skills involve planning, monitoring budgets, forecasting costs and revenues, cutting costs, mapping strategies, evaluating performance, running meetings, and organizing necessary reports" (Hogan & Warrenfelz, 2003, p. 79).

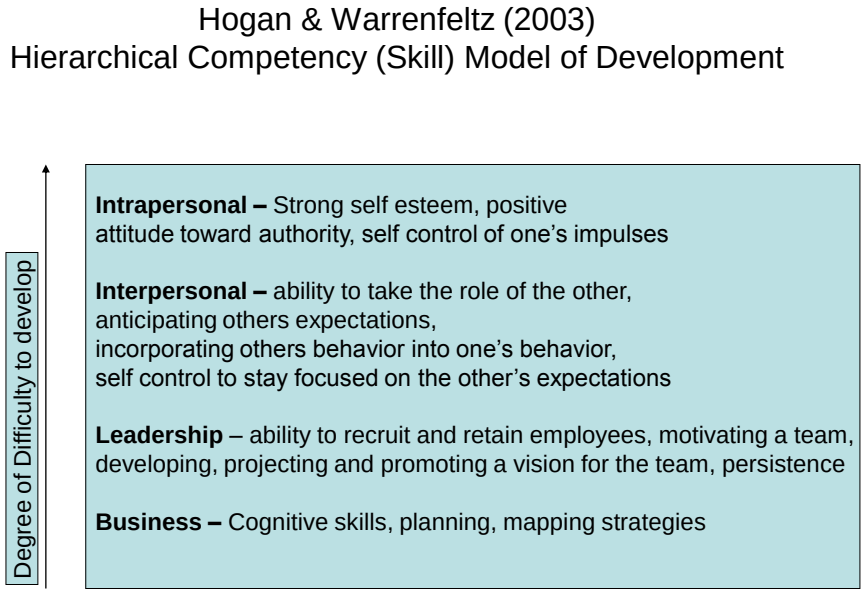

Figure 3. Hierarchical competency model.

Psychological aspects of executive development. Kaiser and Kaplan (2006) discussed the inner game of leadership and described how leaders seek to protect themselves from the recurrence of earlier psychological wounds. Kaiser and Kaplan stressed the importance of the development of the intrapersonal domain in management development: "Improving performance involves not just acquiring or modifying behaviors, but also contending with skewed mental models, biased expectations, and emotional overreactions that throw off behavior in the first place" (p. 464). Their central idea is that executives, in common with most people, are sensitive to repeating hurts from the past, and methods for protecting themselves give rise to panic, fear, and anger. If unrecognized, the resulting defensive behavior is often misguided and counterproductive.

Using a grounded theory approach, Kaiser and Kaplan (2006) developed a model aimed at determining why certain executives hold back in a particular area of performance or go overboard in that area. Kaiser and Kaplan defined sensitivity as "a set of emotionally charged beliefs and expectations generalized from experience that serve to protect the individual from repeating a painful injury—both physical or psychological" (p. 466). These sensitivities operate below and individual's level of awareness, and the individual is likely to respond with habitual patterns of behavior. Examples of these sensitivities include "having one's trust grossly abused, being rejected socially by one's peer group, not doing well in school, or being the unfortunate child of negligent or abusive parents" (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006, p. 467). Though these classically occur in childhood, powerful events in adulthood can have the same impact (Janoff Bulman,

1992). It is important to point out that according to Kaiser and Kaplan not every performance issue is related to a sensitivity.

Kaiser and Kaplan's (2006) proposed structure for leading executives through a process of understanding sensitivities includes obtaining an understanding of early life experiences, the current state of one's personal life, and an understanding of current and previous work experiences, along with psychological testing. They found that this process can be a moving experience for an individual who begins to view leadership-role performance problems as a function of lifelong issues explicitly connected to "private fears and powerful unconscious needs for self protection as well as the unrealistic assumptions and expectations that come part and parcel with these intense emotions" (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006, p. 475). This becomes a long-term process of outgrowing a sensitivity; it does not happen overnight.

According to Kaiser and Kaplan (2006), the first step is this process is to bring this sensitivity into one's consciousness or awareness. This step is followed by executives learning to recognize emotional signals, enabling them to identify when a situation may give rise to a sensitivity.

The inner theater. According to Kets De Vries (2006), each organizational participant has to deal with his or her own "inner theater," which can be described as "the programming that each person has incorporated from his or her generic inheritance and infant experience" (p. 12). Motivational needs systems are developed by each individual that lie behind that individual's behaviors and actions.

> The interface of these motivational needs with the environmental factors (especially human factors in the form of caretakers, siblings, teachers, etc.) define

> our essential uniqueness and help us to create mental schemas that are carried within us for the rest of our lives, guiding our subsequent relationships with others. (Kets De Vries, 2006, p. 12)

Understanding this inner theater in executives is important because of the influence that these executives have on their respective organizations.

> By making sense out of executive deeper wishes and fantasies, and showing how these affect their behavior in the world of work, a psychoanalytically informed investigation can be highly effective in discovering how people and the organizations they work in really function. (Kets de Vries & Engellau, 2010, p. 186)

This deep understanding of executives is a "good way of analyzing the conflicts and motivations that occur within their organizations" (Kets De Vries, 1994, p. 78). Although it can be hard for senior leaders to explore the deeper areas of the inner theater, through gaining this understanding, leaders can see how their actions impact and influence others as well as the happenings within the organization.

In order to understand the dynamics of an interaction, the logical place to start is with the beliefs and make up of the individuals involved, whether rational or irrational beliefs. Executives need to "face their weaker points, obtain deeper insights about their ways of functioning, understand their defensive structure and character traits and recognize how their behavior affects their organization" (Kets De Vries, 1994, p. 81).

The clinical paradigm. The clinical paradigm based in the psychodynamic approach to leadership introduced by Kets De Vries (2006) is based on four premises: (a) Human behavior, even in its most odd or deviant forms has a rational explanation; (b) the unconscious plays a tremendous role in determining actions, thoughts, fantasies, hopes, and fears; (c) emotions contribute to identity and behavior; and (d) human development is an intrapersonal and interpersonal process.

> Our earliest life experiences have a deep lasting impact on our personality and the patterns of our behavior and relationships. Through early interactions with significant people in child's lives each individual develops patterns of responses to the actions, desires and emotions of other. Those responses become engrained because they work in those early situations however, later in life those same responses may no longer be adequate or appropriate. (Kets De Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007, p. 5)

Kets De Vries et al. defined transferential patterns as the use of

> behavior patterns from the past to deal with situations in the present. . . . Through our interactions with parents, family members, teachers and other authority figures we encounter we develop behavior patterns that become the basis for specific cognitive and affective software. (p. 6)

Kets De Vries et al. continued,

> Executives need to understand that the phenomena of transference is natural and ubiquitous, although we are not always capable of noticing and recognizing it. Transference can erase the boundary between the past and the present, causing people to replay the scripts that they have lived in the past. (p. 7)

Kets De Vries et al. also noted, "People whose personality characteristics have been largely formed can still make significant changes in their behavior" (p. 13).

According to Kets De Vries et al. (2007), "Change begins when there is an emotional experience" (p. 110). They emphasized seven key ingredients for successfully integrating leadership development coaching into an executive development program: (a) a natural time for reflection; (b) high-quality, thoughtful, broad feedback; (c) critical influence of the small-group process; (d) the profile and competence of the leadership coach; (e) a variety of processes for follow-up; (f) linking moments and integrating the coaching within the overall program; and (g) different leadership coaching themes in different leadership transitions.

Transformational executive development programs. According to Kets De Vries and Korotov (2007), for a leadership development

> program to be truly transformational, participants need to be able to start doing something new at work or change the way they exercise management functions, which means that personal changes need to be made at the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral levels. (p. 376)

However, for this to happen, program designers must go beyond what is considered knowledge transfer to having an emotional impact on participants.

Borrowing from the psychodynamic tradition, Kets De Vries and Korotov (2007) introduced a three-triangle framework: the "mental life triangle, the conflict triangle, and the relationship triangle" (p. 377). The mental life triangle links cognition, emotion, and behavior. The conflict triangle involves defensive behaviors one has developed over the course of a lifetime. The relationships triangle has to do with two kinds of relationships: between the person and the "other" and the transference relationship. Even adults' responses to situations remain a function of what was learned in childhood.

> When the link between present relationships and the past is made meaningful—in other words, when a person understands old patterns of interaction and then learns to assess functionality or dysfunctionality of these patterns in current relationships—the process of transformation and change is more likely to be successful. (Kets De Vries & Korotov, 2007, p. 381)

Telling stories is a way of working through internal issues and developmental challenges. "Changing oneself is often the most difficult task executives have to handle in their life or career" (Kets deVries & Korotov, 2007, p. 383).

Kets De Vries et al. (2007) made the point that executive development need not be geared to finance, marketing, operations, and so on because presumably executives have obtained these skills. What is needed is a "targeted intervention that goes far beyond tools and techniques" (Kets De Vries et al., 2007, p. xxvi). Further, Kets De Vries et al. stated, "The psychological costs of leadership are underestimated" (p. xxxix).

"Convinced that behavior in organizations concerns only conscious, mechanistic, predictable, easy-to-understand phenomena, executives are often frustrated and disillusioned when they try to apply formulae to change human behavior" (Kets De Vries et al., 2007, p. xliii). Finally, Kets De Vries et al. stated,

> It is often difficult to understand how concepts taken from fields such as psychoanalysis, psychodynamic, psychotherapy, dynamic psychiatry, cognitive theory, developmental psychology, anthropology, group psychotherapy and family systems theory can be applied to the world of work. . . . The fact remains, however, that any meaningful explanation of humanity requires multiple lenses for investigation, and a variety of means of verification. (p. xliii)

Chapter Summary

This literature review has taken the reader through the foundational constructs of learning and leadership. More specifically, transformative learning was examined extensively to provide an understanding of the framework used to examine the participants' lived experience in this study. A presentation of the history of leadership theory and the difference between various terms such as *manager* and *leader* helped to further define the specific area of research covered by this study. The researcher narrowed the study to executive development and transformational executive development experiences.

Additionally, this chapter detailed the progression of leadership development and demonstrated a lack of research on programs that go beyond the traditional teachings of business fundamentals to a deeper understanding of the psychological make up of the individual. Models from both Hogan and Warrenfelz (2003) and Kets deVries and Korotov (2007) show movement in this direction and help to demonstrate the need for

further study. The following Chapter 3 describes the methodology used by the researcher to carry out the study and details the history of the phenomenological tradition of inquiry.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Overview of Chapter

This phenomenological research study sought to understand the learning experiences of developing executives who participated in an intense executive-feedback session. This chapter begins by discussing the history of the phenomenological research tradition and describes the specific research methods used in this study. Qualitative interview techniques are discussed in detail as well as the unit of analysis, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and human subjects review. There is a growing realization in the social sciences, specifically with the study of human behavior in organizations, that quantitative research methods alone may not be enough to capture a complete understanding of what is occurring in organizations (i.e., Quinn, 1996).

Similar to how Marquardt, Leonard, Freeman, and Hill (2009) described the importance of not discounting anything other than Level 1 evidence (reliable), this study did not seek to create some type of cause-and-effect relationship but rather sought to understand the learning outcomes through interviews with the participants. This study would be most closely related to their qualitative, exploratory design in that the output involves analysis and organization of behavioral data to create themes or categories. This study using participant interviews provided some level of evidence of the learning experience on executive behavior in the workplace. As Marquardt et al. detailed in their review of action learning studies, if the goal is generally to understand the impact of the

program, a quantitative study design may not provide the necessary depth of understanding.

Research Procedures

The qualitative approach selected for this study is the phenomenological approach as detailed by Moustakas (1994). The phenomenological approach was chosen because the phenomenon of transformative learning through an executive development experience focusing on life histories is not well understood in the literature. The researcher sought to understand the individual and understand the "lived experience" (Creswell, 2003, p. 15) of these developing executives. Creswell (1998) indicated that Moustakas "proceeds to elaborate on a type of phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology that traces back to Husserl (1975) but places more emphasis on bracketing out preconceptions (epoche) and developing universal structures based on what people experience and how" (p. 54).

Phenomenological research tradition. The tradition of inquiry called phenomenology, according to Creswell (1998), "has its roots in the philosophical perspectives of Edmund Husserl" (p. 51) where the researcher sets aside judgments about what is real. The social perspective, or social phenomenology, is founded on the concepts of Schutz (1997). Husserl (as cited in Klenke, 2008) intended for phenomenology "to be a science of consciousness" and he "rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that information about these objects is reliable" (p. 223).

The phenomenological research method supported the study's goal of understanding the learning experiences of developing executives. "The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain

comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Husserl (1975) wrote that the "necessary path to knowledge which can be ultimately justified is the path of universal self-knowledge" (p. 39). The experience or perception of any experience or phenomenon then becomes a function of the perception of the one who experienced it. Therefore, for this study the researcher sought to understand the experience of developing executives.

Interpretivists, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979), believe reality is socially constructed by each individual, and it is impossible to fully know another because it is not possible to fully understand the beliefs, perceptions, and viewpoints of another. However, through this phenomenological approach the researcher was able to develop a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences.

> One undertakes qualitative research in a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language. (Creswell, 1998, p. 14)

Developing executives within a corporation were the subjects for this study. Because the study used Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning theory, based on the constructivist world view, seeking to understand learning through understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences was appropriate. "We must become phenomenological detectives, immersing ourselves in learners' world views and assumptive clusters, as a first step in exploring how to encourage them to move outside their comfortable paradigms" (Brookfield, 1990, p. 180).

Epoche. Husserl developed a philosophic system rooted in subjective openness. Husserl developed the concept of epoche. Moustakas (1994) explained, "The researcher following a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 22). Following the epoche is transcendental phenomenological reduction, where everything is seen as new and fresh. Through this process the researcher develops a "description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

Noema and noesis. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology involves the concept of intentionality. "Intentionality refers to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). This has to do with each individual's focus of the mind on a particular object. The noema refers to the perception of the object in one's consciousness and the noesis refers to the meaning one ascribes to the perception of the object residing in the consciousness.

The Research Questions

This study was guided by three research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of developing executives who progress through a feedback session designed to connect early-childhood and young-adult experiences, beliefs, and marker events to present-day leadership behaviors?
2. In what ways do these developing executives experience this process as transformative?

3. What has been the impact of this executive-feedback experience on them as leaders?

Research Design

This study examined how developing executives learn from an intense executive-feedback session designed to connect significant childhood experiences and various psychological assessment results to present-day leadership behaviors. The research design involved a phenomenological approach and used coding and thematic analysis to address the study's area of inquiry. The researcher used Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of the executives through developing textural and structural descriptions of how these individuals were able to learn from this feedback session and apply these learnings to present-day leadership behavior. Moustakas described a seven-stage process for analyzing phenomenological data: (a) listing and preliminary grouping, (b) reduction and elimination, (c) clustering and thematizing, (d) final identification of invariant constituents and themes by application, (e) constructing an individual textural description, (f) constructing an individual structural description, and (g) developing a composite textural and structural description for the group of participants.

The operationalizing of empirical phenomenological research originated with Van Kaam (1959, 1966) with his investigation of really feeling understood. Van Kaam (1959, 1966) operationalized empirical phenomenological research in psychology. This process is described in detail in the Coding and Thematic Analysis section.

Qualitative interviewing. Six weeks to nine months following an individual's executive-feedback experience the researcher used a qualitative interview to seek to understand his or her experience and learning outcomes. According to Creswell (2003), "The interviewer should use a small number of open ended questions that are designed to draw out the participant's views and opinions" (p. 188). In-depth qualitative interviewing as described by Klenke (2008) "implies an egalitarian relationship" (p. 127) where the interview is described as "a social interaction between the interviewer and interviewee in which both participants create and construct narrative versions of the social world in which they live" (p. 130).

Unit of analysis. For this study the individual was the unit of analysis. The sample was 11 developing executives within a U.S. corporation. The researcher, through a pilot study of two individuals, was able to assess the viability of the interview protocol and questions. Based on Creswell's (1998) suggestion regarding the appropriate number of participants for this type of study, 11 individuals were selected.

Sample selection. The sample consisted of 11 developing executives who had been employed by this organization for at least 2 years and who had been identified as an up-and-coming leader ready for the next phase of development. This organization, located in the Eastern United States, is a privately held service organization in existence for more than 20 years with over 3,000 employees. These individuals were selected for this particular study because they had experienced leadership responsibilities and were on track for additional levels of responsibility within the organization. According to Moustakas (1994), the most important criterion for any study is that the individuals

participating have experienced the phenomenon being studied. Although the researcher collected some demographic information, the primary criterion for participation was that the individual had been through the development experience.

Pilot study. A pilot study was conducted as a part of this research study. The two participants of this pilot study had completed the executive-feedback session within the prior 2–6 months and their data was included in the overall study with the approval of the Dissertation Committee. The researcher used semi-structured interview questions as outlined in the Interview Protocol. The researcher then used the coding process as described below to determine the meanings attributed to the experiences resulting from the learnings of the executive-feedback sessions. These meanings were grouped into themes. Through the pilot study the researcher gained insight into the methods for recruiting participants, collecting data, interviewing techniques, transcribing interviews, and coding data.

Data Collection

This study used Mezirow's (1981, 1991) transformative learning theory as the framework to examine the executive-feedback process and learner outcomes. The researcher identified 11 developing executives who had completed the executive development experience from a list of 25 individuals provided by the company. The interviews took place within the participants' offices or in their conference rooms. Demographic data were collected from each of the subjects, including age, marital status, educational background, tenure with the employer, and positions held.

The structure of the interview involved questions designed to understand the participant's lived experience of the executive-feedback session as well as the learning outcomes from the experience. In accordance with the research questions, the individual participants were asked to consider their behavioral changes since the feedback session and the outcomes on their positions of responsibility within the organization. Because Mezirow's (1981, 1991) theory of transformative learning was used, careful attention was paid to understanding how each of these individuals described the experience as transformative in accordance with Mezirow's theory. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Then, the data gathered in these interviews were subjected to an extensive coding process and interpreted by this researcher.

The executive-feedback process was a learning opportunity for developing executives within a private, for-profit, corporate enterprise. The first part of the executive-feedback session was a 2-hour interview between the psychologist and the candidate. Goals for the session, impressions of the testing, and life and career history were discussed. Most importantly, a partnership was formed between the candidate and the psychologist about the parameters of the use of the testing results. During this discussion, significant marker events and models for behavior were explored and identified. At times, this could be an extremely emotional experience for the participant.

After this initial introduction and history, the formal feedback process was initiated. Senior associates were invited into the session. Senior associates included the participant's direct supervisor and usually one other individual two levels above the participant, or perhaps a financial executive or corporate training executive who generally

interacts with the participant on a regular basis. Rules of confidentiality and specific goals and objectives were then defined. The formal feedback session was audio recorded so that the participant could remain fully engaged and not distracted by taking notes. However, the participant was permitted to take notes during the session, and the audio recording was given to the participant at the conclusion of the session; no one else retained a copy.

The psychological test data were never out of the hands of the psychologist. Data were protected in classified files, with access only available to the psychologist and the participant. It was emphasized that an executive-feedback session is not a performance matrix and is not an implied or stated guarantee of promotion; it is a succession-planning and individual-development initiative. The participant's immediate supervisor and associates were expected to provide feedback to individuals to help them understand the impact and perspective of their skills abilities, attitude, and behavior as they relate to leading, managing, and partnering with team members. Following the discussion, the psychologist and the participant met to summarize and build recommended prescriptives.

The executive-feedback process. The steps involved in this feedback process were the following:

1. A supervisor nominated a subordinate located at one of the company offices around the country to go through the executive-feedback experience at the company's headquarters. These individuals, once identified, were called candidates.

2. Several weeks before the feedback process, administered by a licensed psychologist, the participant was sent a series of assessment tools developed by the psychologist. Candidates for this process received a test battery including the following: (a) Multidimensional Aptitude Battery; (b) the California Psychological Inventory; (c) Millon Index of Personality Styles; (d) The 16 Personality Factor Test; and (e) a series of internally developed instruments intended to measure an individual's emotional intelligence as well as to gather historic data, including what he or she considers major marker events that helped shape underlying core beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. The first four instruments have been proven valid and reliable instruments, whereas the internally developed instruments have not. These internally developed instruments include (a) Leadership Effectiveness Profile; (b) Executive Octagon, a multidimensional manager or leader competencies assessment; (c) Career Reflections, a sentence-completion exercise; and (d) the Leadership Survey.
3. Upon completing these assessment instruments, the participant returned the assessments to the psychologist for scoring and interpretation. The assessment tools were meant to measure intelligence, creativity, and personality and to provide an understanding of the individual's life experiences.
4. Several weeks then elapsed to allow the psychologist to score and review the testing material. On the day of the session the first step was for the psychologist to meet individually with the participant to obtain a sense of who

this person is “in person” as opposed to “on paper.” During this audio-taped session, the psychologist reviewed the participant’s life history in conjunction with the results from the assessment materials. The intention of the psychologist was to uncover origins of patterns of behaviors, origins of frames of reference (Mezirow, 1978), and the effects of significant events in the lives of the participants.

5. The psychologist then led the participant through a process of becoming aware of how the experiences and belief systems discussed and uncovered in this session impact the individual’s relationships and daily interactions with employees as well as personal relationships (i.e., spouse, child, or parent).
6. The next step was the invitation of the participant’s supervisor into the room to join in the discussion and help the participant to frame what had been learned and set these learnings in the context of the executive’s daily responsibilities.
7. If available, a senior executive (or other executive as noted above) within the participants division was invited into the room to listen to what had been learned, provide feedback if possible, and then set what had been learned into the mission and vision for the organization.
8. Once this discussion ended, the session was concluded by the psychologist spending one-on-one time with the participant to review the experience and discuss any final thoughts or directions for future action. The candidate was

given the only audio recording from the session. There were no written reports filed with the company or informal reports coming out of the session.

9. Several weeks later, a follow-up was done by the psychologist to help coach the individual on the integration of the learnings from the executive-feedback process into his or her daily routines and actions.

The interview protocol. The purpose in this study of the researcher's interview with each participant was to answer the research questions. Listed below are each of the research questions and the corresponding interview questions used in an effort to answer that research question. First, four background questions were asked:

1. Could you please describe for me your position within the organization and talk about your career path prior to joining this organization and then your career path through this organization?
2. Could you please describe your daily responsibilities?
3. How do you believe you are viewed by your employees as a leader?
4. How would you describe your strengths and weaknesses?

Research Question 1. What is the lived experience of developing executives who progress through a feedback session designed to connect early-childhood and young-adult experiences, beliefs, and marker events to present-day leadership behaviors? This question was answered through Interview Questions 5–9:

5. Tell me about your experience in the session.
6. What did you learn about yourself and your personal life history?
7. What surprised you about what you learned?

8. What did you agree with, what did not agree with? What did you do about what you learned that you did not agree with?
9. What do you consider the most important learnings from this process?

Research Question 2. In what ways do these developing executives experience this process as transformative? Research Question 2 was answered using data from Interview Questions 10–14:

10. How has the experience of the Executive Feedback changed your perspective about your self (how you see yourself)?
11. Have the ideas that you held about yourself and your experiences been changed through this process? Please elaborate.
12. Has this experience resulted in a change or changes in your behavior? Please explain.
13. What feedback did you hear that caused particular changes?
14. What part of the feedback experience was most impactful?

Research Question 3. What has been the impact of this executive feedback experience on them as leaders? Research Question 3 was answered through data from Interview Questions 15–17:

15. As a result of this experience are you leading differently? Please explain.
16. What have been changes in your work behaviors/actions since the experience? What specific steps have you taken to make these changes?
17. What feedback have you received that give you an indication as to how these changes have been viewed by others?

Finally, Interview Question 18 asked participants if there was anything else that they would like to express about this entire process. That concluded each interview.

Data Analysis

The data gathered in these interviews were subjected to an extensive coding and clustering (Creswell, 1998) process and then interpreted by this researcher. For this phenomenological study, the researcher used Moustakas's (1994) revised Van Kaam method of analysis of the data. The researcher used both a formal coding process and Moustakas's method of analysis to review and analyze the data. These two processes were not completed independently, but rather the researcher used both methods simultaneously and recursively to obtain an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants.

In order to reduce any bias, the data were coded and the interview questions were reviewed by committee members to ensure objectivity of design, even though follow-up questions within the individual interviews were at the discretion of the interviewer. Follow-up questions were consistent across the various interviews to maintain a focus for the study. A coding system was developed to identify emergent patterns and themes in the data. However, it was important to be able not only to report the emergent patterns and themes, but also to attempt to describe the true experience. Because Saldana (2009) recommended that the researcher not wait until all data are collected to begin the coding process, this researcher began the coding process shortly after the completion of the first interview. This helped to begin to identify invariant constituents for Moustakas's

methodology and also helped to ultimately develop a comprehensive list of codes for the study.

This researcher used the coding software Atlas ti. to assist with the review and analysis of the data. Saldana (2009) suggested that the process of coding in qualitative research is more of a cyclical than a linear process, because data are coded and then recoded in a recursive process. Saldana made the point that coding methods can be mixed and matched depending on the research study and that there is no absolute correct method for one particular type of study. According to Saldana, with "in vivo" coding the researcher pays attention to the "words and phrases that seem to call for bolding" (p. 75). This researcher began with "in vivo" coding because of the importance of letting the voices of the participants come through in the data. Once that process was completed, the researcher went back with a more structural coding process, whereby elements or steps from various theories detailed in the literature review were used as a framework through which to approach the data. This is the point where concepts and stages from Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1981, 1991) and concepts from the psychodynamic leadership approach were introduced into the coding process. In the end, however, it became apparent that qualitative research has an inductive nature, and significant themes and patterns naturally emerged from listening and reading the voices of the participants.

Coding and thematic analysis. For this research study Moustakas's (1994) modified Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was used. The researcher listed every expression that seemed to be representative of the experience. This is called horizontalization. Then, through the process of reduction and elimination,

the researcher subjected each expression to examination to determine if it contained what Moustakas described as “a moment of the experience” (p. 121) so that the experience could be abstracted and labeled. These labeled moments of experience are referred to as the invariant constituents because they capture the essence of the experience for the individual.

The third step in this method was to work to develop clusters and themes. Moustakas (1994) recommended that the researcher “check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the participant” (p. 121). An individual textural description of the experience for each individual was developed. This description basically explains what happened in the session. Then, a structural description, which seeks to explore and detail the underlying dynamics of the experience, was developed. Moustakas recommended that the researcher prepare an individual textural structural description for each individual. However, given the rich descriptions in each of the individual textural and individual structural descriptions for the participants, this step was not included in the research. Finally, the researcher used the above to construct a “composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Table 1 presents the methodology.

Table 1

Methodology Implementation

Overarching constructs	Subordinate constructs	Forms of data	Data collection methods	Data analysis methods	Study sample
Leadership Learning	Leadership development Executive development Transformative learning	Narrative Thick description Participant stories Participant thoughts and emotions Interview excerpts	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews Bracketing	Bracketing Coding and thematic analysis Transformative learning framework Hybrid of deductive and inductive techniques	Developing executives in a private corporation Purposeful criterion-based sampling

Trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described trustworthiness in qualitative research with four terms: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. The researcher details below the steps taken to insure the trustworthiness of the study. Trustworthiness of a qualitative study is important to establish not only for the outside reader, but also for the participants in the study as they are giving their time in contributing to the research project.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented four questions that researchers should ask themselves:

1. How can one establish truth of the findings of the inquiry (truth value)?
2. How can one determine the extent to which findings from one study will have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects (applicability)?

3. How can one determine whether findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the study was replicated (consistency)?
4. How can one establish the degree to which findings are determined by the subjects and conditions of inquiry and not by the biases, motivations, interest and perspectives of the inquirer (neutrality)?

In order to address these questions, Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed "means whereby the naturalist's alternative trustworthiness criteria may be operationalized" (p. 301). Detailed below are each of the criteria and how the researcher addressed them in this study.

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified five techniques that a researcher can use operationalize trustworthiness criteria: (a) prolonged engagement, persistent observation, or triangulation; (b) peer debriefing; (c) negative case analysis; (d) continued checking of preliminary findings against archived raw data; and (e) member checking (p. 301). Creswell (2003) added that the researcher should provide "rich, thick description" to "transport the readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (p. 196). Creswell also suggested that the researcher present "negative or discrepant information that runs contrary to the themes" (p. 196) and clarify researcher bias. Although Creswell suggested using just one or more of these techniques in removing concerns about the credibility of this particular study, the researcher used the following five techniques: (a) thick, rich descriptions, which were satisfied by the use of Moustakas's (1994) revised Van Kaam method of analysis; (b) peer review by a fellow doctoral student; (c) member checks to confirm accuracy of interview data; (d) the

identification of researcher bias documented in the researcher's journal; and (e) the presentation of negative or disconfirming evidence.

The peer review process used in this study included weekly conference calls with two peers during the study to discuss research questions, researcher bias, interview techniques, confidentiality issues, coding approaches, and other issues related to the structure. Ultimately, the themes and conclusions of the study were reviewed in detail. A peer reviewed the coding structure used by this researcher and was given one interview to code using the researcher's coding structure. This process resulted in a general confirmation of the codes used by the researcher and healthy dialogue related to the researcher's decision of including and excluding certain codes.

Several months following the interviews, member checks were performed. Each participant was called to review the interview data and to allow each participant to modify or add to the information collected. Generally the member check process resulted in confirmation of the material collected, excepting minor changes such as particular details of a story that were easily changed and did not affect the coding structure or process. One additional piece of information provided by two of the participants was that several months following the executive-feedback session they had gone through a 360-degree feedback session, which they believed helped greatly with further processing what was learned in the executive-feedback session. Most participants found this member checking process interesting in that they were able to hear exactly what they said in the interview as well as provide input into themes and conclusions of the study.

In order to identify researcher bias in the study, a journal was kept to document feelings, thoughts, and potential biases prior to each interview as well as to document impressions and ideas following each interview. For a brief period before each interview the researcher meditated in order to attempt to clear the mind of any bias and to prepare to be completely engaged with the participant throughout the interview. The process of journaling and brief meditation was effective in allowing concentration specifically on the interview as it happened.

In this study the researcher does present negative or disconfirming evidence primarily resulting from the interviews with two participants. One of the participants viewed the development experience as negative. The other individual believed that the presence of a particular individual in the room during the feedback session significantly reduced her willingness to reveal and discuss deeper aspects of herself. These two experiences were unique and different from those of the majority of the participants and are further discussed in Chapter 4.

Transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that the researcher "can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether the transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" and cannot provide "an index of transferability" (p. 316). In other words, the researcher can only provide the data for the reader to make their own decisions about the transferability of the findings in the study. Given the population used in this study, it was not this researcher's intention to generalize findings to other populations.

Dependability. Dependability refers to a certain measure of accuracy in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two methods used by this researcher to address the question of dependability. The first method, epoche, refers to one's ability to set aside understandings, judgments, and knowings in order to visit the phenomena in a fresh, wide-open manner (Moustakas, 1994). The second method used was a journal kept by the researcher to document and acknowledge potential biases.

Confirmability. Confirmability for this study was established by maintaining an audit trail for the data collected. As noted above, the researcher used a journal to document potential biases. All raw data and all journal notes were kept in order to strengthen the audit trail.

This approach helped to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. These methods assisted in providing the reader with a more accurate and true understanding of the experience of the developing executives.

Human subjects review. With regard to the ethical issues and the human participants in this study, confidentiality for the company and for the individuals was paramount in the study, which is why the researcher limited the amount of published demographic information on each participant. The researcher assigned aliases to the individuals participating in this study and explained the purpose of the study to each participant prior to obtaining his or her commitment to participate. Participants were told of their right to withdraw at anytime and that the researcher could remove them at any time from the study. Each participant signed an informed consent form as required by

The George Washington University. Given the profile of the individuals involved in this study, confidentiality was the primary concern among the subjects.

Lessons learned. Lessons learned included researcher bias, participant-related issues, and data analysis issues. These lessons are detailed below in an effort to provide direction and guide future research.

Researcher bias. Moustakas (1994) stated, "In the epoche process we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things," and "whatever or whoever appears in our consciousness is approached with openness" (p. 85). Although one can never really be free of bias and predispositions, this researcher made significant efforts toward the idealized epoche. As an executive within another organization it was difficult, at times, to keep in mind the role of the researcher. It was easy to empathize with the participants regarding their struggle to modify certain behaviors that they were realizing were not productive as they make their way up the corporate ladder. It was difficult to hold back at times from providing advice, based on the researcher's background in counseling psychology and business. Additionally, it was difficult to walk out of the office of some of the participants knowing the depth of the struggle that they were experiencing on their own, without support in many cases. The issues with which they struggled were not just work issues, but had implications for their marriages, their ability to be healthy role models for their children, and their ability to have healthy relationships outside of the work environment.

***Participant-related issues*.** Lessons learned related to participants included physical location, the interview as therapeutic, and creation of relationships with participants. These issues are discussed below in order to guide future research.

Physical location. Initially the researcher was given a list of 25 individuals who had been through the executive-feedback experience within the prior 8 months. These individuals were located in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Given the problematic nature of coordination and traveling to areas other than the United States, the individuals selected for this study were located within the borders of the United States. Even within the United States, the participants were scattered throughout the country as opposed to in one central headquarters location for the company, although some were in the headquarters location. The researcher debated about phone interviewing participants and had the offer to phone interview one participant on the West Coast. However, in the end the researcher decided that the interviews would be more effective if held face to face in the participant's office. As with all multicity travel, this created coordination issues, but the face-to-face interviews helped to build the relationship with each participant and also made the member checking process easier, even though it was done by phone.

The interview as therapeutic. An unintended result of the study was that for some participants the interview for this study became an opportunity for them to continue to process what was learned in the executive-feedback session. For some this was the first time they had discussed the experience in depth with another individual, including a close family member or spouse. This was evidence of the deep struggle that ensued following their executive-feedback experience as these developing executives attempted to make

sense of what was learned and struggled to process it and incorporate it into their daily behavior. Several stated that this interview was helpful for them because it forced them to revisit what was learned and make an effort to process and begin to act upon the learnings.

Although not intended, at times the participants wanted to further explore and process their childhood experiences and events. Although not a trained psychologist, the researcher tried to listen and reflect on what was being revealed, being careful not to try to diagnose, interpret, or recommend a particular course of action. Often the researcher encouraged the participant to have a follow-up meeting or discussion with the psychologist or perhaps to seek external counseling.

Creating a relationship with the participants. Initially the researcher was concerned, given the nature of the material that would be discussed, with the ability to create a relationship with the participant with just one 90-minute interview. The researcher had prior business relationships with several individuals within the organization, however, no prior relationship existed with any of the participants in this study. The positive relationship with the company allowed some immediate level of openness with these individuals that would likely not be afforded to any complete outsider. Given the trusting nature of the culture of the organization, most participants were willing to eventually completely open up in terms of what had been learned and struggles they continued to face. One initial consideration for this study was to use a three-interview method to try to build further rapport with these participants in the hopes of more full disclosure. Having decided upon the one interview format, it is difficult to

know what the difference would have been with more interviews, although some of the individuals obviously were not comfortable completely sharing all that was shared with the psychologist, and understandably so. Comments such as "I have had issues with male figures in my life" were made rather than going into more depth about the specific issues. These types of cryptic statements were not the norm, as most shared more specifically the nature of the critical incidents.

Data analysis issues. Data analysis issues were based on recording devices and transcription. This researcher chose to use two recording devices for the study, which was somewhat cumbersome at times and had to be explained to the participants. One of the recorders was a traditional cassette tape recorder; the other was a digital recording device that could be downloaded onto a computer if necessary for storage. Using two recording devices provided the comfort of having a back up, especially in a few instances when one device was started later than the other. It was also interesting that even after the devices were turned off and the interview was concluded, the discussion often continued and more important information began to come from the participant. On several occasions the researcher asked a participant if he could turn the recorder back on to capture more of what the participant was saying about the experience.

Although initially these interviews were to be transcribed by an outside third party, ultimately the researcher did the transcription of the interviews. Each interview took approximately 3 hours to transcribe. Transcribing the interviews personally gave a closer relationship to the data. Through transcribing the interviews, the researcher could make critical notes of the participants' voices and what perhaps was being inferred by the

tone of their voice and inflection, which would not have been picked up from a transcribed document. Although this added to the time frame associated with this study, it ultimately helped with a better and deeper knowledge of the data and of the participants' deeper struggles.

Summary of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 described the research design and the methods and procedures used by this researcher in seeking to understand the experiences of developing executives after having gone through an executive-feedback process. Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological method was used in order to understand the "lived experience" (Creswell, 2003, p. 15) of these individuals. Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning theory was used as a framework to examine adult learning through this leadership development experience. The findings and analysis using the research methods described above are presented by this researcher in Chapter 4. Conclusions are presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

Overview

This chapter presents the results and analysis for the study. Section 1 discusses and reviews the qualitative analysis process for this study. Section 2 provides identification and discussion of the themes that emerged through the 11 interviews. Section 3 details both a textural and a structural description based on Moustakas's (1994) revised Van Kaam (1959, 1966) method. The textural description is basically seen as how the individual reported his or her experience of the session and what was learned. The structural description has to do with the underlying dynamics of what occurred during the feedback session. Finally, the fourth section of Chapter 4 presents the composite textural structural description for the group so that the reader may understand the meanings that were derived from the commonalities of the participants' experiences as a group.

Section 1: Review of Research Approach

The primary question for this study was, "What is the lived experience of developing executives who progress through a feedback session designed to connect early-childhood and young-adult experiences, beliefs, and marker events to present-day leadership behaviors?" This study employed the qualitative methodology of phenomenology because it supported the study's goal of understanding the learning experiences of developing leaders. With a phenomenological study the researcher seeks to "obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

A composite methodology consisting of a coding and thematic analysis and a phenomenological approach was used to address the study's main area of inquiry. Mezirow's (1981, 1991) theory of transformative learning was used as the framework to examine the executive-feedback development experience.

Eleven participants employed by the same company and ranging in age from 27 to 46 were interviewed. Each individual participant was given a pseudonym to further protect identity and ensure anonymity. Leaders of the company used in this study were concerned about protecting both the individual and the company identities; therefore, any company information and any individual biographical information have been kept to an absolute minimum. These developing executives' positions in the company varied and included senior roles in sales, finance, and business operations. These executives were located throughout the country in field offices as well as in the corporate headquarters. One tape recorded 90-minute interview was conducted with each participant in his or her office and later transcribed for review. When necessary, follow-up phone conversations were held to clarify responses, but this was limited. However, the researcher did perform member checks with each participant several months following the interviews, as detailed in Chapter 3.

Moustakas (1994) described a seven-step approach to analyzing phenomenological data: (a) listing and preliminary grouping (horizontalization), (b) reduction and elimination to determine invariant constituents, (c) clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, (d) final identification of the invariant themes, (e) constructing an individual textural description, (f) constructing an individual structural

description, and (g) constructing an individual textural and structural description. Finally, the researcher constructs a composite textural and structural description for the group. Except for item (g) above, the researcher followed these steps for this study.

Epoche. "The researcher following a transcendental approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the epoche process)" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). Following the epoche is the transcendental-phenomenological reduction. Ultimately one derives "a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Prior to each interview the researcher briefly meditated in an effort to keep the mind completely open. In addition, a journal was used to continually note any biases, thoughts, or feelings prior to and immediately after the interviews.

Horizontalization. Beginning with the complete transcript of the interview for each participant, the researcher sought to identify the primary descriptions and emotions related to the executive-feedback experience. This is called horizontalization. To provide an example of the horizontalization process two examples are provided below. These are the horizons or statements from two of the interviews.

Ethan: Horizontalization. The first example is from Ethan. Some of Ethan's statements are horizontalized below.

> The psychologist puts you at ease. . . . You feel like he is the kind of guy you could go on a motorcycle trip and just hang out and talk to and sit around the camp fire and hang out with.
>
> There were some things I think the psychologist shared with me that were helpful that I really hadn't thought much about cause I have a tendency at times from a

temper standpoint, I can get pretty explosive and I can turn it on when I need to. I am __ years old, seems like I was just working on it but really it has been such a long period evolving through; that is what I think I have done was is pulled back so hard on the reins to try to get it under control from a business standpoint, the psychologist pointed out that maybe you need to bring a little of the pendulum back to the middle and share a little bit of that, you got a really good story and background that a lot of people don't always have, and you can draw strength on that. And if you can take that passion of fire or when you get a little frustrated or angry with the situation, you can bring it out in a constructive way to make sure that you are giving people the feedback and pushing people to be better.

I'm sure it correlated, and then also seeing the examples and learning from those as a child and you see explosive behavior, you are going to repeat explosive behavior, you're not going to learn certain styles, you're going to mimic that style. So when dealing with a confrontation or a situation that got a little heated, it was, ok, this is where I am going, kids repeat what they see. So I wouldn't, I don't want to sound like a blame, but I think that had an impact on me. Or the situation was stressful at home so it would get released in other areas so, definitely, I believe it had an impact on it.

We talked about my grandfather who passed away, he retired when he was early ___ I think, he worked at _____, had the typical pension and retirement plans, so he was able to retire early. I spent a lot of time with him as a child during the summer 'cause my mom worked full time and he was in ok health, not super good health, but nothing that you thought would have caused him, and at ___ he got cancer [and passed away]. And the marker for me was don't plan on tomorrow, plan on enjoying today and kind of helped me realize that you need to enjoy every single day and focus on those things. So I believe we talked about that a little bit as well, and why I try to find something good about every single day or look for the opportunity to enjoy yourself. Get your job done, but enjoy yourself.

Maybe I shouldn't be so comfortable with the things that have happened over my life, but I have shed enough tears over it, I have had enough internal anguish. That internal voice that people have I have worked so much on quieting that, like, as far as accepting who I am, my background, where I'm at, what I do and embracing it, so it is kind of like in that session there is not a lot the psychologist is going to say that is going to surprise me too much. Or if it does I will be like ok, I never thought about that, let me kind of understand it and figure out something to do with it, whether I agree or disagree.

Yeah, growing up there was no hugs from Dad, he learned in the war, this is he and I have had a dialog about it, you don't build friendships, you don't build long-term relationships. you don't know if the guy next to you is going to be dead the next day. So, he, it is funny, he says that, but then he has this great friend that he

has had since he was growing up in _____. These guys, they still get together sometimes, almost every other weekend take trips together, their wives, my mom, my dad and his friends, it's funny. So he says that. but then, it is a little bit of a dichotomy, because I think he has that with the people he is really kind of close with, he sometimes still thinks that way. So I think he has changed a lot with that, he hugs my son, we talked about that with the psychologist, he will hug my son, but he and I shake hands, so that's the game, but not the game because that is how we interact. I don't feel I need that 'cause when I have needed a hug I have gotten it from him, and when he needed one because he and my mom were going through something he has broken down to that point. But it is not his way, and I feel ok with that as far as not accepting it, like well, it's not ever going to happen, it's not what I need from him. I need to know that we have a good relationship and that he cares about me, and he knows I care about him, and we have that.

It made me realize that I hadn't identified, put the pin on the board and said this is what I'm expecting, this is what I want, because I have always been about I want to do well in my role, I want to do what the company needs me to do, but I haven't really demanded anything along the way.

Sometimes that is like the self-promotion side of things that come with being an executive, that you have to self-promote throughout the organization. And it's uncomfortable for people because it means boasting or, like, hey did you know I did this sort of thing? Especially in this organization, which tends to be humble, keep your head down and do your job and serve others—being the one to stick your hand up and say, "Did you notice I did this?" is, maybe doesn't jive with the culture. But then you hear from these guys that you know developing that relationship with a senior leadership and somehow self-promoting would help your career.

I want to be able to be my natural self around people, and that helps with having a relationship and then also just feeling comfortable doing that and not having something going on inside your head telling you ok, you need to say this thing, do a certain thing, how to be a certain way. And that's one of the things I have definitely worked on is not having long pauses during the conversation.

I'd say I have a little more edge about certain situations now, and you feel the edge a little more. I think sometimes the team got a sense that I was frustrated about something but not to the extent that they might of needed to or what's genuine to who I am and how I feel about the situation of what's important or what's not important, so you're setting those kinda frustrated here, not real frustrated there, so what are we focused on, kind of making sure you're letting that show through in beyond words. So I think I've done a better job with that and having that edge to certain situations and realizing that you can still be frustrated, you can still be angry about a situation and express that in a way that gets your

point across pretty well, but you don't have to yell, you don't have to scream, you don't have to curse. You can do that, and people can understand what's important and what your passion is and what you're fired up about and why. So I think I have definitely let that out a little bit more since then, and actually it feels a lot better, more productive in some ways.

I don't think it was that noticeable the difference to where I had gotten feedback, and honestly I don't think it was that noticeable or dramatic of a difference, but I feel it inside.

Near that time I was at the point where this isn't good either; we need to either disband this group and stop meeting or start being honest with each other and start making some changes about the team. We have had some really good dialog at that point in time, and since then as well, people aren't letting each other slide on certain things. And if they have any issue we are getting to the root cause and challenging each other's approach with things. So it not where I think it should be, but I think it is light years ahead of what it was and it is productive. I would stand behind that group and say we are being productive now.

I have no embarrassment as far as keeping secrets, because if people really knew this about me I don't think they would think less of me, I don't feel that way at all. I think, really, at the end of the day it is a good story because I turned out ok, I'm not sure how good I turned out, it is kind of hard, ok, I guess I'm doing ok.

I think more for me, a lot of things are just evolutionary changes.

I was nervous in the beginning at times, which I don't know why I would be, he is such a nice guy. But I was nervous that I didn't convey myself very well. I had a business thing to talk to about, and I don't think it went as well as it could have. I realized that it was based on that I didn't have a comfortable relationship with him nonworking, so when I had a business issue I couldn't read his cues, didn't know where his sense of humor would go, and he didn't know mine. So the interaction was always awkward. And I definitely decided that I am not going to let that happen with the next person in that position.

My new supervisor has even commented on that when he took over, I was one of the first people in my peer group to reach out to him. He was just like, what are we meeting about? And I explained to him why, and he was like, oh, and we had a great conversation. Sometimes I think if he was wondering what I was going to hit him up with or what I was going to ask him.

Henry: Horizontalization. The second example is from Henry. Henry's statements are horizontalized below.

It was a little nerve wracking at first. I mean, anytime that you have to take excessive amounts of tests, which bring about awareness in you and not just kind of who you are and what you like and don't like, but there was intellect-type stuff. And I think in just talking with people who went through it you are kind of just, like, wow, there is just nowhere to go here, you are an open book. I definitely was anxious with that process.

At the same time it was an excitement to know that, hey, here is who I am, and I get to get in front of them like some of them like ____ I really do not know that well, and kind of be like, here I am, this is who I am. Although that causes a lot of anxiety, there is a lot of joy to say, hey, you know what it's out.

It was only through the conversation and the analysis by the psychologist that what came out of it I feel like it accurately depicted who I was. I felt good about that. The anxiety was, I felt that who I was may be a little bit, um, I don't want to say different than the normal company-type stuff, but I think that was part of my angst was that I knew what was coming out of this. It might be quote-unquote "not aligned with the typical person," not necessarily from a cultural standpoint but from just the type of person that is typical here.

The psychologist—it was great, he has a way of just cutting right to it. We talked a lot about my family and my upbringing, he really has helped me and through this and through other experiences he has really helped me about my upbringing and looking at both of my parents. And both of my parents struggled . . . and there are a lot of issues there, and he kind of just did not let me get away with, well, there are issues there he kind of really kind of said, "Hey, do you understand what that means?"

I am like, ok, so he definitely helped me to slow down on that piece, and I have thought about it, but not quite the way that he helped me to think about it.

To some degree we all acknowledge them, but to some degree we do not all acknowledge the pain that comes with them. That is where, he just kind of . . . he just says, "Hey, we are going to keep talking about this because I don't think you are quite there."

Now mind you, that part of what helped me with this is that I had gone through several years of counseling with some of this stuff, so I have definitely talked about some of these things. But what he helped me to do was to connect more of the dots. So as he took the information and started going through some other stuff, he helped say, "Hey, do you get this stuff?" and I was like, "I think I do," then he was like, "Then let's talk about how this has played out in your life."

Yes one of the things that surprised me was when he said . . . "Do you know how well you scored on the intellectual side of things?" I said no. He said, "Do you realize you are a pretty smart guy?" I said no, and he said, "Why?" And I said I never did that good in school, I never applied myself, I was always all over the place on things. Nobody ever said, "Hey, [Henry], you can do this." The first time I ever felt like that happened was in this company.

There was this fear built into me, I was just a scared kid. I had anxiety from the time I was [small], I just remember being anxious my whole life. It was instilled in me that if you do this, this could happen; if you do this, that could happen. I knew that walking into the session, but I did not know where it came from. I just thought it was me.

For me, there were a couple key statements that were surprising to me. One was ___ said, "[Henry], before I walked in here, this is what I had written on my paper: 'The sky is the limit, but blank for you.'" And he went on to explain he was, like, "I am not sure that you are in a position in your life where you are willing to sacrifice everything that you are probably going to need to sacrifice." So we talked about that.

And that is where it gets into the person that I want to be may not always fly with what we are trying to create here.

So that was the challenge I had to work through, and that was . . . is who I am going to fit here really?

The last thing that was interesting was that _____ said you let certain people in, and others you don't.

It is still a battle I have to fight, because for me to worry is so natural, it always almost irrational.

I told my wife that there is no greater battle in the world than the battle that is within you. No one can see it and no one can fix it. There are evil forces that battle against you, it is horrible. But you can't act like it is not there. To medicate it does not take it away.

So that is still a hard thing for me, but I feel like I am getting better. I am not sure, when I say "better," I am not even sure what the right answer is to being vulnerable in those situations. I would venture to say that you may see more of the influence upward and laterally. So if you asked my peers and the people I work for, they may say that, but the people below me, I don't know if they would say that. They have seen a big change in [Henry], primarily because I had worked through a lot of this stuff before, personally. But the biggest part that came out of

> the feedback is the people above and peers, you just need to be conscious of the fact that those people, they don't know you that well, some do because I have worked with them for so long, but others don't.
>
> It really helps you to look at yourself today and say, "This is who you are now." You have to determine whether you think the information is really you, or is it skewed, but this is where you are at today and what got you here and you have to deal with that, you can't just suppress it, you have to deal with it and say, "This is maybe who I am." The affirmation from that, I mean, you have people around you saying that is who you are and it is ok.
>
> For me it was important that I had leaders around me who saw those gaps, the vulnerability.
>
> So the more sharing of the story and the more other people coming back and saying, "Hey, you know what? Wow, it is great to see you got through that." It is almost counterintuitive. That is the part I could not figure out, and it is like, how do you do that?

Invariant constituents and meaning horizons and themes. The second and third steps in this method were identifying the invariant constituents (moments of the experience) and then working to "cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that are related into a thematic label" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). These thematic labels helped the researcher to come to understand the nature of the experience for each individual and ultimately the group of participants. Following the final identification of themes, the researcher developed an individual textural description of the experience and an individual structural description for each participant. Finally, from those the researcher developed a composite textural and structural description for the group of participants.

The interview transcripts of all 11 participants were analyzed using phenomenological reflection and imaginative variation to find the significant, relevant, and invariant meanings shared by all participants. The constituents were clustered into seven themes (see Table 2). The data gathered in these interviews were subjected to an

extensive coding and clustering (Creswell, 1998) process and then interpreted by this researcher.

The software program Atlas ti was used as a means to systematically code and interpret the data. This coding system was developed to identify emergent patterns and themes in the data; however, the intent was not only to report the emergent patterns and themes, but also to provide a better understanding of the true experience.

Table 2

Invariant Meaning Horizons

Theme	Specifics
Feelings of fear and anxiety	Generalized anxiety about what would be uncovered Supervisor's reaction to what would be learned Use of data Made easier by psychologist Made easier by culture Made easier by sharing of supervisor
Coming to an awareness of some aspect of self	Imposter fears Lack of confidence, esteem Work ethic Lacking emotional expression Relationship building Difficulty with decision making
Seeing connections	Parental behavior Parental communication style Critical incidents (e.g., divorce, death) Significance of story Parental expectations
Ongoing struggle	Unresolved issues, difficulty processing Viewed as a long-term process Desire to learn and acquire skills Uncertainty of the "how" Internal challenge to change engrained behavior patterns Desire for ongoing coaching or outside counseling
Application to the workplace	Masking Trepidation Change in behavior with significant discomfort Trying out new roles & behaviors Unwillingness to change More effective personal and organizational behavior
Importance of context to the development experience	Creation of safe and trusting environment Importance of competent facilitator-psychologist Importance of supervisor sharing Confidentiality Existing trusting relationship with supervisor Experienced trust in prior development events
Desire to disconnect what was learned from the next generation	Achievement Addiction Work ethic Perfection

Section 2: Coding and Thematic Analysis

Section 2 presents the findings of the coding and thematic analysis methods that were employed to examine the lived experience of these developing executives. The coding and thematic analysis yielded seven themes (see Table 2): (a) presession feelings of anxiety and fear, (b) a coming to awareness of some aspect or aspects of themselves, (c) seeing connections from early-childhood experiences to present-day behavior both inside and outside the workplace, (d) a significant ongoing struggle to understand and incorporate what was learned, (e) an attempt to apply what was learned in the session to the workplace, (f) the significance of the context of company culture as it relates to learning and leadership development, and (g) a desire to disconnect what was learned from the next generation.

The executive-feedback experience served as the disorienting dilemma described by Mezirow (1991) in that it was an event that triggered an examination of assumptions for these executives. The level of depth of the assumptions that were examined varied with each participant and was often a function of the individual's participation in other organized programs designed to reveal and explore the same type of information mined in the executive feedback. In addition, a few of the participants had been through extensive personal counseling in which they had explored their development in depth.

A few individuals had a difficult time seeing how the information they were presented with in the feedback session actually fit into their understanding of themselves. Keith said,

> One thing that sticks out is in looking through the results that leadership desire came out, like, it didn't look like you enjoyed people or enjoyed leadership. I was

> surprised there. From a conviction and confidence thing, I don't agree with that, not sure that I have anything that can back it up, but I could say, hey, I disagree with that. I enjoy what I am doing; I enjoy that aspect of it; I enjoy leadership responsibilities, desires, and all that so a little bit of that. I don't think it was hard core, like this is not for you type of thing, but a little surprised that it came out that way and then did not agree with it.

Ian said,

> I guess it was surprising that on the empathy side that it was low. . . . I don't generally feel that I am, you know, I pay attention to, like, Hurricane Katrina, and I pay attention to human suffering stories. A lot of that stuff I tend to feel like I pay attention, like I am the kind of person that watches a movie and I will tear up at different parts that play on the human spirit. I like to, I think I am a pretty spiritual person, not from a religious standpoint, a God standpoint, but just from a religious standpoint. Where it was a surprise or a blind spot more related to just day-to-day life where things that jam people up or cause stress, that absolutely cause stress to me, there are things that a normal person does not think much of that probably will jam me up because it is like, geez, I have enough on my plate, I have enough going on as it is, can I not get a break? So you know, I think that was probably the biggest eye opener for me that I need to gut check myself: Am I becoming jaded?

Initially pushing back on this information, both were coming to see the relevance and applicability of this feedback. These observations triggered the self-examination process.

Theme 1: Feelings of anxiety and fear about the executive-feedback session.

Entering into this type of experience for these developing executives created general feelings of fear and anxiety. Although the company did not provide any expectation to the individual in terms of how this information would be used, there was concern over whether the information would be used in terms of promotions and demotions and whether it would be used to measure their abilities or personality against others in similar positions or being considered for certain promotions. After an initial session with the psychologist, the participant's supervisor, often along with an additional executive, was invited into the conversation, leading the participant to have significant concern not about

what is going to be learned but what would be done with the information learned. This quote from Jeff was representative of the group of participants: "I think that anytime that someone is going to lift up the covers, lift up the hood. . . . You know, are they going to find something that I don't want them to find?"

Several participants reported that their fear related to the company finding that they were somehow different than the typical person or that their story was so unusual that they would be viewed negatively by others. This was evidenced by Henry's statement:

> It was only through the conversation and the analysis by the psychologist that what came out of it I feel like it accurately depicted who I was. I felt good about that. The anxiety was, I felt that who I was may be a little bit, um, I don't want to say different than the normal company-type stuff, but I think that was part of my angst was that I knew what was coming out of this. It might be quote-unquote "not aligned with the typical person," not necessarily from a cultural standpoint but from just the type of person that is typical here.

These feelings of fear and anxiety reported by the participants were often moderated by several factors as the executive-feedback session commenced. The most frequently heard comment related to either an existing relationship with the psychologist facilitating the feedback session or the feeling that the psychologist immediately put the individual at ease through his reassuring and understanding words and tone. Cathy said, "He puts you at ease." Gavin said, "A lot of the anxiety went away."
Additionally, several reported that they had a previous relationship with this psychologist because they had been involved in other developmental workshops he facilitated.

Although most participants described the atmosphere as comfortable and trusting, in a few instances the trust was put into question. One instance was Cathy's experience, where she was unaware that a certain additional individual would be in the room

following her time with the psychologist. She was aware that her supervisor would be there but not this other individual, whom she considered to be more of a peer. She said,

> I was a little taken back because I don't report to him and I don't know why he was there. I wished someone would have told me about it. I view him as my counterpart, not my superior. He and I have a great relationship, and he gave me good feedback during the session. It was feedback that I took with me from the session and had never really thought about some things, but it threw me off. It is a little intimidating being in a session like that anyway, and the psychologist is such a nice gentlemen, but when people are throwing questions at you, you have to be calm and feel comfortable and have a sense of peace and have a confidence that what you say in the room is not going to be used against you, you know? So that was a little different.

Theme 2: Coming to an awareness of an aspect or multiple aspects of themselves. Through this executive-feedback session the participants generally came to a new level of awareness of some or multiple aspects of their personality. Further, they were able, with the assistance of the others in the room, to see the relationship of those aspects of their personality to their relationships with others in the company and even outside the company and understand how these factors impacted their work performance.

All of the participants reported coming to see aspects of themselves in a new way, although the degree to which it seemed to sink in varied across the participants. Some participants knew these things about themselves already, and the psychologist was able to help them understand the source of that aspect. Frank said,

> I feel like it was really good. It was kind of scary, the results, kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy, you kind of know what is going on but you don't. It was the first time that anyone has ever correlated, it wasn't really factual information, but it was kind of, this is what the results show and based on our conversation here is what could be directly correlated with that. A lot of it had to do with my core upbringing and family and just me as a person, which was cool, I thought that was awesome, it just kind of gives you a different vantage point.

This new awareness did not have a primary theme for all of the participants. The themes included imposter fears, one's tendency to intimidate others, a lack of emotional expression, the significant impact that one has had on others, one's extreme work ethic, extreme anxiety, the significance of one's life story and what one has had to endure, difficulty accepting positive feedback, conflict avoidance, indecisiveness, strength of intellect, temper issues, inability to see one's self as successful, lack of empathy, unhealthy levels of stress, and lack of confidence.

Through the discourse some were able to see for the first time a certain aspect of themselves. Cathy was beginning to see the nature of her extreme work ethic and that she has been looking for that same work ethic in others, perhaps unfairly. She said, "I am coming to realize that others are not like that." Beth and others came to see more clearly the imposter fears deep within themselves and this related to their confidence and competence to perform in a position. Beth said, "I never felt like I belonged where I was because I didn't feel like I had the skills and talent to do the job." Many of the participant's stories were significant in the sense that they had endured extremely difficult childhoods and through this session were able to understand and become aware of certain aspects of themselves. Ethan said, "You can do a lot of damage without ever touching a kid."

Frank said,

> But my childhood was a little unique in that my father was abusive. So, like, dealing with it on a day-to-day basis and then figuring out from a growing-up standpoint, I really did not have a mentor. My father and I are pretty tight now, but the relationship was not really there growing up. We basically tied that back into affirmation; I like pats on the back and I like recognition.

Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (2000) is often an "intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change" (pp. 6–7). This process of the executive-feedback session correlates to Mezirow's (1991) first stage of the learning process, the disorienting dilemma that confronts individuals with a new situation and causes them to examine their assumptions. Jeff said,

> The most important thing I learned . . . I spent a lot of time wondering to myself in self-reflection, asking myself why I think the way I do, why do I have some of the fears that I have? When did that start? Because I think back to my childhood, I was always a kid that did well in school, popular, I lived a very normal life as it would appear, and I am trying to think back to see where things started to change for me. When did I start to lose my confidence and self-esteem? I can't put my finger on it, but the psychologist helped to get me there and helped me to understand why I feel the way I do regarding certain things. I think that was the biggest learning for me. I did not walk out of there saying that I know how to fix it. I still have to figure out how to fix it, but he helped me to understand more about why I am the way I am.

Theme 3: Seeing connections from early childhood to present-day behavior both inside and outside the workplace. Many described that with the assistance of the psychologist they were able to "connect the dots" of the past in a way that helped them make sense of what they had experienced in their lives and in the workplace. These connections, which many were seeing for the first time, helped them to make sense of certain aspects of their lives. For the most part, these connections had deep implications for their behavior, often requiring significant unlearning or viewing certain aspects of life and behavior in a new way. It was in these revelations that the "gold" was found for this study, because these learnings held the key—they were the lynch pin for unlocking some participants' internal prisons and provided a new sense of freedom.

Henry said,

> That is where, he just kind of . . . he just says, "Hey, we are going to keep talking about this because I don't think you are quite there." So he just helped me to connect a lot of the dots, where some of the previous counseling helped me to work through some of the pain, you know what I mean? He just helped me to tie it all together, which was good, because before I got in there it is hard to talk about these types of things with people like, I mean, I know those guys but . . . he just helped me to connect things a little bit better so that we could talk about things.

Jeff said, "I will say this, the psychologist session connected some of the dots for me."

This connects with Taylor's (1998) observation:

> Meaning perspectives are often acquired uncritically in the course of childhood through socialization and acculturation, most frequently during significant experiences with teachers, parents and mentors. Over time in conjunction with numerous congruent experiences, these perspectives become more engrained into our psyche and changing is less frequent. In essence they provide a rationalization for an often irrational world and we come to depend on them. (p. 6)

Cathy said,

> The feedback that we went over, it is funny how you were brought up. . . . Like my mom is such a strong individual, and no one would ever tell my mom she could not get it done. . . . She would just get it done. . . . She had these two kids, and she did not care how she would get it done, but her kids were going to go to college, regardless of lack of outside help. And I look at my own kids today, and you can see that determination just going down the line. You instill it in your children.

Theme 4: Ongoing struggle to incorporate what was learned. A common theme from the participants related to somewhat of a "what now?" statement. They had experienced this session and basically come to an awareness of a significant aspect of their personality and a connection to better understand its source in their lives. The challenge now became, "How do I go about making a change in my mind and then in my behavior?" Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007) stated, "Change is difficult, and changing oneself is often the most difficult tasks executives have to handle in their career. Even the

best intentioned people rarely manage it singlehandedly" (p. 383). For many, just the opportunity to sit with this researcher and reflect again on what was learned in the feedback session provided an opportunity to revisit the important learnings and remind them of the work that needed to be done. Some expected to receive follow-up coaching from their supervisor, and others were hoping for a follow-up meeting with the psychologist. Yet, for most the outcome of the feedback session had resulted in a new way of seeing themselves, although they realized that certain behaviors represented their natural tendencies or habits and to make changes would be a significant challenge. Jeff said,

> I am working on these areas, but I don't know what that looks like yet. I have talked with my wife about going to talk with someone about it to help me figure it out, but I have not quite gotten there yet. I have tried to go online and do some reading about it and trying to understand what the drivers are. . . . I did not walk out of there saying that I know how to fix it, I still have to figure out how to fix it, but he helped me to understand more about why I am the way I am.

According to Boyd (1989), transformation is defined as a "fundamental change in one's personality involving conjointly the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (p. 459). The challenge for these executives comes down to determining how to go about this integration, because many realize that they are simply wired this way and that what they have discovered about themselves and their patterns of behavior is engrained. The prospect of changing this wiring or this engrained behavior is a daunting task. Jeff said,

> You know, what I need to work on is not going to be fixed overnight. It has taken many years to get here, and it will take me many years to get to where I want to be. It is a journey that I am taking; my wife is helping me along that journey.

Keith came to learn more about his avoidance of conflict primarily due to his parents' divorce and related incidents. He said,

> My goal is not to come to agreement, but confrontation is not something I am after. You want it to be good so how do you get through it. They asked about confrontation and how I viewed it. Helping me to see how good can come from confrontation. I understand it, I get it, but my natural style is to avoid it.

Cathy said, "It is funny how you are wired. . . . What connects in my brain is different from how others brains connect."

Many of the participants expected that the company would provide some type of ongoing coaching or guidance related to handling the information that was learned. Many suggested that the company implement an ongoing coaching program or structured developmental process, perhaps orchestrated by their supervisor. Ian said,

> I guess that I feel like where there is an improvement point, I would say that I need more help, others may not . . . but I have a tough time coming away with tools or ways to continue to focus or explore it. . . . I worry about it being an event, which is great, I look at it as being a good marker event in my life, but is that changing me or shaping me? You say do people know that you have changed Ian, and have you changed? I don't know, I think I have, but I must not be doing a very good job of that because I should be asking them, "Do you notice anything different about me?" What I would like to see more of is how do you bring that back to being a better leader or doing better in your role at the end of the day so that you can be as successful as you could be if you focused in these couple areas. That is where I don't feel that there is as much there to help with that transition.

Although disagreement with the results was not a common theme, some participants came to a new awareness and made a judgment that this was not an aspect of their personality that they were willing to change, or they did not see a strong enough case being made for them to implement this change. Gavin said,

> If there was a point of respectful disagreement it was the showing of the stress. The potential benefits are not significant enough to change my personality. I am not disputing the fact that there could be benefits, but they are not significant

> enough, and we discussed that and he agreed, if that's the case then this is my personality.

Theme 5: An effort to apply what was learned to the workplace. The ultimate goal of the executive-feedback session according to the company is to "build a new generation of dynamic executives," suggesting an expectation that what has been learned in this developmental event will translate into a change in behavior for the executive in the workplace. The theme that emerged related to applying what was learned to the workplace was best described as being similar to Theme 4; it seems to be an ongoing struggle to actually take what was learned and apply it daily. Most participants reported coming to this new awareness, struggling to determine what it meant for them and for their behavior, and then tip toeing into actually applying it daily with varying degrees of success. For a few, the ongoing internal struggle prevented them from taking action, as they were still trying to sort out and critically reflect on what was learned in the feedback session. However, most made attempts to change their outward behavior in dealing with direct reports, peers, and senior executives. Frank said, "I try to pick and choose my battles, in terms when to be pretty intense and super aggressive and when not to be, so that not everyone likes that style." Gavin said, "But if you actually witnessed the conversations with executive leadership you would witness them a lot more now than you did prior to the feedback session." Finally, Keith said,

> I am thinking about how I approach things and with the confidence discussion and with the others, keeping that in the back of my mind and being mindful of what's there, the setting where I am. I think about it a lot, how can I do better, it comes out more often than I think. It won't be in every interaction but maybe between I can reflect on that.

This process, however, has been met with great trepidation. Mezirow's (1991) final four stages of transformative learning are (a) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans (Stage 7), (b) provisional trying on of new roles (Stage 8), (c) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships (Stage 9), and (d) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Stage 10). Where some of these developing executives seemed to get stuck is in Stage 7, in that following the learning in the session there was a struggle to acquire the knowledge and skills to make the behavioral changes. Many participants in this study clearly articulated their immersion in the final three stages as well, in that most were trying to incorporate the learnings through trying out new roles and developing some competency in doing so. Beth said,

> So it has definitely allowed me to, like, I have gone back now and shared some information with my direct reports so that they can understand who I am, why I may act the way I do at times, and what's made me who I am today. So I feel like it is giving them a better perspective, especially, I have a male that works for me knowing that I have had issues in the past with people trying to overpower me and belittle me, I wanted him to understand, hey if I'm too aggressive, you know my personality, you need to give me a sign to slow down a little bit. Please remember, we are all working together here, I need to make sure that awareness is there. So I have opened up a lot more from going through this session, which was a huge benefit to me.

When asked whether or not his direct reports would see a change in his behavior since the executive-feedback session, Jeff said,

> I think they would say no, because I think I do a good job of masking what I feel internally. If you went out and asked people if I had low self-esteem, they would not know. I do not walk around with that as my persona. You can't; you gotta walk around with confidence, but that does not mean that you don't feel certain things on the inside. They would not say that anything has changed; it is more things that I struggle with internally.

This reflects as well the strength of the executive to mask certain internal feelings yet present a certain public face or façade.

Theme 6: Significance of the context of company culture as it relates to learning and leadership development. According to Taylor (2007), many questions remain about the role of context in fostering the transformative learning experience, indicating that this area of research is greatly overlooked. Several of the participants discussed the nature of the culture at this particular company as fostering this type of disclosure, vulnerability, and ongoing development. To some degree this culture described by many as nurturing and trusting helped to create the right environment for these sensitive discussions. Henry said,

> This environment helped me to get through that, because I think it creates a level of confidentiality that is so understood, like there is so much here, that if you breach that, I don't think that would be taken well.

A few of the participants referred to other developmental company workshops that they have attended as they have grown, learned, and developed over time. In discussing these other workshops, a common theme of trust emerged. Frank said,

> That 2-day workshop was extremely emotional, I basically cried for like 2 straight days. It was definitely the best training I have ever been to. The overall message from me to those guys there was I kind of introduced everyone. I was kind of like, "Hey, I need all of you guys just as much as you need me for all of us to be successful," so it was that team environment, it was like, "I am new in town, some of you were here prior to me getting here, and I need your help." I wanted to try to create that feedback-rich environment where people aren't afraid to speak up and tell you how they feel and how you are affecting them positively and negatively. It was awesome, and I was able to get specific feedback from people in front of the group based on what they love about me and don't love about me.

The fact that all of the participants' supervisors had been through this process was a significant factor in each of the participants' willingness to engage and disclose.

Gavin was discussing his inability to show a great deal of emotion and said,

> Part of it was share the emotion, share how you are doing, um, the biggest piece of that emotion piece was that I never show stress or I rarely show stress. So the catch was that managing me or working for someone, you are always in a state of unknown on do I really feel the pressure, do I really understand the pressure of the job? Do I really know what is going on? I am the same way whether we are doing fantastic or horrible. So we talked a lot about that, and my boss shared that he was similar and that he got feedback and had to work on it over the course of time. He realized that once he did he saw benefits from it, but he was at the same point I was in, where I don't see how you would get benefits from seeing whether I am stressed or not.

Beth said,

> It was interesting because my boss doesn't say much, he is a very quiet guy, but he was able to when I talked about some experiences in my life that's made me who I am, and, part of it was, hey, I kind of feel embarrassed I let some of these things happen to me, and he shared some personal experiences with me, which I felt very comfortable and confident that everything that I shared there I shouldn't feel bad about and that I sort of had some sort of connection to him based on some of his experiences. So I learned you have to open up and trust.

Theme 7: A desire to disconnect learnings from the next generation. For many in the study this experience with the psychologist helped them to critically reflect on their childhood experiences and now, with children of their own, they were making conscious efforts to break a certain cycle of behavior. For instance, Aaron said that he did not want for his children to experience the absence of their father due to his working all the time. He said,

> I do not want to fall into the same rut as I experienced in childhood. I want to be able to do more. I try not to open up the laptop at night. Usually the first thing I do is open up the laptop when I get home. I am trying just to spend some quality time with my son so I am trying . . . there is a pull . . . which is not good, I should be enjoying the time . . . but I am thinking in the back of my head about work. . . . But I think I am getting better at that.

This supports Theme 4 as well about the ongoing struggle these individuals have with making these changes. Frank said,

> My mom is basically like the saint of all saints, she would do anything for anyone. And now that I am married and have children it is almost like I use that life experience to say, hey, how can I use the things that my parents did well and those things that I feel like they did not do well? You know, how can I change that type things.

Gavin said,

> The emotion piece was not new for me, it has become important for me to be that way. My kids are young, so I know that I don't want to be, the one thing about my dad was that he always worked, I did not want to be that guy.

Although this theme was not discussed by all of the participants, it was discussed by several. Those who did describe this desire did so with passion in the sense that they saw how it might have hurt them and they did not want these habits passed on to their children.

Summary of Section 2. Section 2 summarizes the findings from the individual interviews conducted with 11 developing executives using Mezirow's (1994) transformative learning theory as a framework for inquiry. All of the stages of Mezirow's transformative learning theory were revealed through the interviews with the participants. Each participant did not detail each stage in an orderly fashion. Further, not all of the participants resided in one particular stage, as some appeared stuck in Stage 7, acquiring the necessary skills to make behavioral changes, whereas some others were exploring new roles and trying on these new behaviors.

Section 3: Textural and Structural Descriptions

Creswell (1998) suggested that the textural description refers to the "what" of the appearing phenomenon. The textural description is meant to relay to the reader the actual experience of the individuals as they went through the executive-feedback session.

Below, this researcher has detailed an individual textural and structural description for each participant.

Aaron: Individual textural description. Overall Aaron believed that the executive-feedback session was a great experience. He experienced the feedback session as "comfortable," indicating that the discussion centered on his family upbringing, his childhood, his relationship with his supervisor, and his history with the company. Since this was not the first time that he met the psychologist facilitating the feedback experience, he felt that the psychologist was easy to talk to and that the conversation set up a couple of topics for discussion when his supervisor and another executive came into the room. He was happy that both his direct supervisor and the other executive attended the feedback session. Aaron discussed with the psychologist his upbringing; he has a large family and has happily married parents. In the feedback session he described the importance of work ethic in his family, which he indicated is still important to him today.

"I am close to both my mother and my father, they have influenced me more than anyone. They both worked, blue-collar family, we did not have a lot, but they gave us a lot." He discussed the fact that his father worked a lot of hours and was not really there during Aaron's childhood, but Aaron recognized that the sacrifices his father was making were for the family. Aaron came to see that his father's strong work ethic shaped who he became in that he will work any time of day or night to get the job done. He described one of the most significant learnings from the feedback process to be his recognition of the embarrassment he carried with him as a teenager because his father was employed by

_____, even though he had risen through the ranks of the company after beginning as a _____.

> Growing up, you know, there is a certain stereotype when all of your friends' fathers are working for like IBM with more prestigious roles. Growing up in your early teens you kind of wish that your father had a more prestigious position.

He was also surprised to learn that he does not take the time to reflect on all that he has accomplished with the company and reflected during the interview on the difference between "being successful" and "feeling successful." This second most important learning allowed him to get a true sense about how others felt about him.

> Having the opportunity to sit and talk freely about each other, how he thought I was doing, the strengths and weaknesses, and where I stood on his leadership team and with the psychologist chiming in and sharing thoughts and insights was valuable.

He took away from the feedback session that he is very hands on and has high expectations of his coworkers, driving objectives and initiatives in the office. This causes him to come across as rigid, so he is working on his ability to be creative.

> Sometimes I don't allow people to be as creative in their roles as they could be. . . . Not being as flexible to their creativity can limit some of them. . . . I am trying to be more flexible to ways people operate in their roles. . . . I am trying to be more cognizant of that, be more flexible, not being stubborn and letting them try. . . . This is what is expected and necessary to be successful in that role to be effective, be open to their creative ideas and their ways of doing things but still getting to the result. You would see that difference from then to today. The executive feedback helped me surface that, and now I just try to be more aware of it and try to be more flexible with different ideas and avenues that they can bring to the role.

When asked if others would indicate that there has been a change in his behavior, he said that he has been told that he appears less stressed.

> I was high strung and stressed. Others have said they have seen me relax a little more, I am trying to be positive but driving results, making sure we are in a position to grow the office. . . . I am not as stressed out as I have been, people say

> that there have been more positive ways in which I interact with others around the office.

Aaron: Individual structural description. Overall the executive-feedback experience for Aaron was good. As with many other participants, his ability to become vulnerable and to disclose issues during the executive-feedback session depended on the trusting relationship created with the psychologist and the perceived level of trust with the others who entered the room after the initial session with the psychologist. Because Aaron had an existing relationship with the psychologist and attended other development sessions with him, he immediately felt comfortable sharing and discussing his personal life history with the psychologist. During the session, Aaron became aware of the guilt and shameful feelings he felt during his childhood about his father's employment and the discontented feelings of his father's job pulling him away from the family. Now, later in life, looking back with some perspective, he was able to realize that his father was doing his best, using whatever means possible to provide for his family and honor his responsibility.

> I am a little embarrassed that I felt that way during those years, but they enlightened me that I was young and growing. Now, I am so proud of him for the way he took care of us, and what they gave us. We had a roof over our heads, food on the table. The feedback session put that into perspective for me.

When asked if he had acted on what he learned in the session regarding his feelings about his father, he indicated that discussing it in the session motivated him to have a conversation with his father. "I did have a conversation with my father, and told him that I was embarrassed and sorry of the fact that I felt that way, how proud and thankful I was for his effort."

> It makes me feel a lot better about who I am and I had bottled up these feelings from the past, and you never know what is going to happen, so I want to be able to make sure I can do that, I wouldn't want to never communicate that with my father. I think he was happy to hear it, it was probably on the back porch having a beer, I just took a moment to thank him for all that he has done. I haven't lived back there for like ___ years, so when you go home you have some good conversations more focused then you have in the past, and I just took the opportunity to share some of that with him. It was a good conversation. We are very close, I talk to my parents all the time and try to visit as much as possible, especially now with my child, they really want to see ___ and they come down twice a year.

The distance he felt from his father, he now realized, might have motivated him to leave the area his family calls home and seek to establish himself elsewhere.

> I wanted to get away from everyone . . . get out on my own and grow up a little bit. I was the only one to pack up and move, to get away from that comfort zone and my family support. So we discussed that a little bit.

He also saw how the high level of work ethic modeled in his family influenced him today. "I believe so, there is a direct correlation. My parents working, working, working . . . and now me having the same type of mentality." He saw it as both a blessing and a curse in that it was helping him to be successful but also pulling him away from his wife and child, and he is making efforts to change that.

> I want to make them proud of me, I want to give them everything I can. They are the most important thing to me . . . my wife and my children. I want them to be proud of who their father is and what I do. I try not to open up the laptop at night. Usually the first thing I do is open up the laptop when I get home, I am trying just trying to spend some quality time with my son, so I am trying. There is a pull . . . which is not good, I should be enjoying the time . . . but I am thinking in the back of my head about work . . . but I think I am getting better at that.

Several of the executives described the difference between being successful and feeling successful.

> I don't think about that too often, but the psychologist was able to help me take a step back to see the impact that I have had, the people that I have promoted, where they are today, and then when my supervisor and the other executive were

> brought in it was good to hear from them, what they had to say about me and what I have done. It was good to hear that, it was very valuable, good to hear that feedback, it was a good conversation for an hour or hour and a half with everyone. We communicated openly, it was a great opportunity and experience.

As he reflected further he continued,

> I still don't feel successful. . . . I always think that there is more. You could be Number 1, making a lot of money and things are going well and I would say let's keep going, let's raise the bar. I don't know if it is a positive or negative thing, it is good to just taking a step back to a certain extent and realize that you are successful and that other people view you as successful.

As he connected this to the organization he realized the double-edged sword:

> You are doing well . . . but that can also be a negative and have a negative impact on the people that work for me. And if I am always like more, more, more, that can have a negative impact on others. But, man, if we are doing well and hitting our goals, but [Aaron] always wants more and more.

When asked about the connection to his family history, Aaron described realizing the impact of his parents working hard and wanting more for the family. That impacted his drive and his expectations of himself and his staff.

In trying to make the necessary changes in his behavior, he did not plan to discard the work ethic but acknowledged

> If it needs to get done, hey, we just roll up our sleeves and work harder to get it done, and that will make us successful. That's part of it, but now let's also be creative, open it up to different ideas and suggestions, let's not bottle these ideas up. Maybe you can bring something to the office to make us successful because they might help us to be more efficient.

This awareness was helping him to allow others who might take a different approach to a problem to have a voice in the resolution of an issue. Rather than just pushing to grunt through a task, he was trying to open himself to other possibilities and other creative solutions. "The feedback session impacted me, and I have seen some changes in my management of time . . . trying to be creative and allow others to be creative."

The context of culture and the importance of an environment related to individual growth and development also set the tone for this executive-feedback session. Aaron described the culture as follows:

> I am very committed to my staff, the people I work with, I think I have been like that for a long time, with my friends and that is why I think this opportunity has been perfect for me, 'cause you know that was something that was drilled into me since I came here, that was something drilled into me from the beginning was the culture, the commitment to your partners, honest feedback because I care about you, not because I am coming down on you. I am not going to confront you for no reason, let's help each other grow, we all have blind spots and there is always areas for improvement, so I just think that my mentality and who I am aligns very well with our culture and our beliefs as an organization.

Having come to an awareness of the impact of his parent's work ethic on his childhood he indicated a desire to change for his kids. He spoke about his wife in relation to his hours and focus on work:

> She, like any other wife, would like me to not focus so much on work so much and wants me to come home earlier. . . . That is something I need to get better at. . . . I do not want to fall into the same rut as I experienced in childhood. I want to be able to do more.

This is a reflection of how this executive-feedback process has implications beyond the workplace as it reaches back into previous generations as well as impacting generations to come.

He reflected, as many others did, that these learnings create an ongoing struggle related to one's ability to change.

> There is still a lot of work to be done. You know, sometimes when you are driving home, you think that you could have done something differently and hopefully when faced with some scenario you will be different. I am trying to learn from my experiences . . . be more flexible and open to others ideas and hopefully it makes it more rewarding for them.

When asked to comment about the overall experience Aaron said,

> The executive feedback was a great experience. I appreciate the development both personally and professionally. I know other companies do not do this. I appreciate that this company provides these types of experiences; this particular feedback experience was great for me. I want to continue to develop and grow to become a better leader, grow in my role. I believe I have a good sense of myself but often don't think about it, but this forum and this type of experience brings it out, it makes you think about it more, brings it to the table and is something now that I am just aware of. I want to try to be more flexible and open at work and with my family and I think that will make me feel better as well.

Beth: Individual textural description. Beth entered the executive-feedback session uncertain as to how much she would actually open up because of her guarded nature. "There is a lot that I share and there is a lot that I don't share, so if it is things that I feel like somebody could use to hurt me or against me, those are the things that I have always kept hidden." Ultimately she decided to go into it with an attitude of "it does not matter."

> This is my second home, I actually spend more time here with these people than I do with my own family, so at this point, if they haven't done anything or used any information against me, why would that change? So it took a lot for me to take that step back and have the trust so I was completely open and shared stuff that I had never shared with anybody with the company before.

She reported that she was nervous going into the session but felt if her career was going to grow then she needed to take some risks and be prepared to discuss her weaknesses.

> I was originally afraid that he was going to be like, "Wow, what's wrong with her, why do we have her in this position?" But it was nice when I went into this, because obviously with the psychologist, he just has a way about him making you feel good about what's happened in your life and who you are, and he makes sure that you don't overlook experience.

She described the psychologist as being a kind of gate. "He allowed me an opportunity to be allowed to present that information, which there was really no other

opportunity for me to," basically saying that aside from this experience there was no forum to have this level of in-depth discussion with a supervisor.

> The psychologist more or less was like bringing two people together and saying I want to have a forum for you so you can feel comfortable and share some things that have happened in your life so that this person can help you grow personally and professionally. And so the psychologist was pretty much the avenue to be able to share. If that session hadn't occurred, would I have ever shared that level of information? Probably not, because there is really no forum to be able to share that kind of information.

As she described her experience in the session, the psychologist helped her to become aware of several things she had not considered. The first was her level of intelligence as shown by the testing data. This was not something that Beth had ever considered and in fact had not given herself credit for or viewed herself in this light. This not only related to her intelligence but her level of accomplishments in her career.

The executive-feedback session was emotional for her because of the events that have occurred in her life. She recognized that she walks a defined line with regard to disclosure.

> It is interesting, because there is facade and people think, I have had people tell me this, the way that I walk they are like the confidence that I exude, I can come in here and have a complete melt down, but I play the part. People think I am very strong, emotions are not there, when in fact, I am probably more emotional than other people because I don't let it show. . . . I have always thought of this as a weakness showing too many emotions, in this job you can't handle the pressure, so I have taken on that mindset you shouldn't show emotion at work, not like that.

As a result of the learnings from the session, Beth reported that the level of conversations and the way in which they happened were different.

> You know, I think part of it is because I have had more confidence, and I do know my job and I do know the company and I know what happens in the field, so I am more confident about the decisions that I make. And part of it was the psychologist and my supervisor being like, "Why don't you give yourself credit?" I think really feeling the confidence allows me to, I'm not trying to

> overcompensate by being aggressive, I feel good about hey, the decision I make might not be right all of the time, but hey, we will learn from that. I think that has definitely helped me a lot.

A big part of the discussion had to do with the imposter fears that Beth carries with her. "I never felt like I belonged where I was, because I didn't feel like I had the skills and talent to do the job."

In describing the experience, Beth said,

> I think going through all of it was a great experience. The only thing I think that needs to be added, changed, altered, is the follow-up afterwards, because the company invests and so does the individual invest a lot of time in this and it seems like you would get more pay off if you did do that, because then you could evaluate whether or not there has been a change, and if there is not change does the process itself need change?

Beth: Individual structural description. Beth's attitude toward this executive-feedback process became one of putting herself out there so that she could learn and develop further in her career and her relationship with others. Her comfort level with the psychologist and his creating the setting for this discussion to take place allowed Beth to be open to examining her existing meaning schemes and assumptions about her ability to trust others and her feelings of being an imposter in her role. As a female in a male-dominated organization, her natural feelings of aggression served her well as she climbed the ladder but had caused her also to guard her emotions.

The creation of this environment and the sharing of her supervisor also led her to be more comfortable with disclosure and helped her to learn to be more trusting.

> It was interesting because my boss doesn't say much, he is a very quiet guy, but he was able to when I talked about some experiences in my life that's made me who I am, and, part of it was, hey, I kind of feel embarrassed I let some of these things happen to me. And he shared some personal experiences with me, which I felt very comfortable and confident that everything that I shared there I shouldn't

> feel bad about and that I sort of had some sort of connection to him based on some of his experiences. So I learned you have to open up and trust.

These early-childhood experiences left her with difficulty seeing herself as truly successful and accepting herself apart from her accomplishments. She said that she never received the positive reinforcement she needed during her youth.

> I feel that there is a connection of if you are not given the positive encouragement and feedback and told how well you have done something and you never get that opportunity to recognize that you have been able to do something well, how are you ever going to feel good about what you do on a regular basis? . . . The psychologist makes you take that step back, because I tend to not discredit myself, but I don't allow myself the opportunity to say wow, look where I am, in a multi-billion dollar company and in the seat that I am sitting in and the career path that I have been able to have. I have accomplished a lot, but I never would look at it that way.

The psychologist providing Beth with the awareness and the connection would not instantly change her behavior or the way she sees herself. Accepting positive feedback has never been comfortable for Beth because it is not a part of her belief system. "I still struggle with that, and that will probably be something that I will always struggle with." The same is true with regard to her comfort level with sharing emotions. When asked if she has become more comfortable with sharing her emotions with her staff she said, "To an extent."

She has taken her learnings from the session and used them to share with others.

> It has definitely allowed me to, like, I have gone back now and shared some information with my subordinates so that they can understand who I am, why I may act the way I do at times, and what's made me who I am today. So I feel like it is giving them a better perspective, especially, I have a male that works for me, knowing that I have had issues in the past with people trying to overpower me and belittle me, I wanted him to understand, hey, if I'm too aggressive, you know my personality, you need to give me a sign to slow down a little bit. Please remember, we are all working together here, I need to make sure that awareness is there. So I have opened up a lot more from going through this session, which was a huge benefit to me.

Beth received feedback regarding her attempts to be less guarded and let her emotions through, but there still is a line that she will not cross. She spoke of a recent downsizing and the need to lay off some of the individuals in her office:

> I really cared about the people who had left, so I think I can show emotions where I need to, but there is a cap. But they can definitely tell, like if something has happened, like that was a huge, second time in my career that I have had to do that, and it was a huge thing that just happened. So the emotions were just there.

Additionally the feedback session motivated her to have conversations with certain individuals who work closely with her. One such conversation occurred with a male with whom she described having an "oil and water" relationship.

> I took him out, we went out and had some drinks and some appetizers, and I explained to him who I was, I just want to make sure that you understand, it is not right or wrong and I'm not saying that it should be acceptable, but at times when you see this behavior out of me, let me explain these events that have happened in my life that is what made me who I am. If we have a conversation I can sense now, I do a better job of trying to sense how somebody is reacting to the conversation versus whatever, not that I mean care about people but, if I felt them getting aggressive, I would quickly just overpower the situation, I'd be like alright, here it is, now I know that if I sense that, hey did I say something, like all the sudden our conversation went from here to now it seems like there are different and is there something that we probably should talk about, so I think I have done a much better job about that and kind of listening to hear other people's emotions.

Beth is determined to take what she has learned and apply it to her children.

> I do know though, that there is a danger, and I know this, but I don't know how to change myself, and I know that there is a danger in some of the ways that I operate, because my son is very driven.
>
> We tell him constantly how proud we are of him and what he has been able to accomplish, but unfortunately I feel like I sort of set the stage that it is never good enough, you always want to achieve more, a 4-year degree is not ok, I have never said that, but he watched my struggles and my sacrifices with me continuing to drive.

Cathy: Individual textural description. Cathy felt she was prepared and knew what to expect from the executive-feedback session. "I had some preconceived notion that we were going to peel back the layers of the onion and get more intimate with each other." She had not been told and was surprised to learn that in addition to her direct supervisor, the participants in her session included another executive whom she viewed as her peer.

> It threw me off a little, no one told me who was going to be in the meeting. I was a little taken back. I don't know why he was there, I wished someone would have told me about it.

Cathy indicated that the psychologist immediately put her at ease. She and her direct supervisor had known each other for so long, they were like brother and sister. Their first point of discussion related to Cathy's black-or-white mentality, that there are few, if any, shades of gray. She does not sugarcoat things when talking with others.

> I think I talk like that, you know, when I am making a point, but I think at the same time I don't think that I think like that. It is just funny that my tests would show results that I don't operate in that shade of gray.

The second thing she discussed with the psychologist was her poor writing skills and how she made it through school.

> I am a verbal communicator, not a writer at all. If you ask me a question, I will tell you what you want to know. One of the questions he asked me was whether I struggled with writing growing up and I said absolutely, I don't like it.

She indicated that she probably got through school by avoiding classes that involved a lot of writing. She viewed her current role as requiring little writing.

> I have a vision of what a leader is, and what we do every day is not a written job. You don't walk into your subordinate's office and say, "Here is your memo today." So that was good feedback, but feedback that I was kind of amazed, what did that have to do with what we are doing today? But now I look at it after being in the role a few months, and it is such a help.

In the feedback session they also discussed her trouble accepting feedback, especially positive feedback. In Cathy's mind she just views what she is doing as getting the job done. When asked about the source of the difficulty accepting feedback she said that she discussed her family history with the psychologist but did not remember it correlating to accepting feedback, although they did discuss her parents' divorce and her mother's get-it-done attitude.

> My mom is such a strong individual, and no one would ever tell my mom she could not get it done. . . . She would just get it done. . . . She had these kids and she did not care how she would get it done, but her kids were going to go to college, regardless of lack of outside help.

When asked if she believes that she is like her mom, she responded affirmatively but said that both of her parents are very determined.

When asked if her behavior had changed as a result of the feedback experience, Cathy indicated that she was coming to realize that others might not be so similar to her, especially in terms of work ethic.

> Being in this organization I was always taught that the people that take on more responsibility is because they see it, it is not because it has been delegated out to them. You just know it needs to get done, so you do it. I am realizing that a lot of people are not like that.

Overall, she described the feedback session as emotional and extremely draining but recalled that there was no trauma in her life that triggered those emotions. She returned to the concern about who was in the room and questioned the depth to which she felt comfortable disclosing.

> When you agree to do this, you are saying yes based on who you know is going to be in the room. I don't know if I opened up as much as I could have opened up because of who was in the room.

Cathy: Individual structural description. For Cathy the executive-feedback session and its depth were definitely tempered by her lack of trust in who was in the room. She was the only individual who expressed this kind of concern and it was reflected in the lack of depth of her experience.

> It is a little intimidating being in a session like that anyway, and the psychologist is such a nice gentlemen, but when people are throwing questions at you, you have to be calm and feel comfortable and have a sense of peace and have a confidence that what you say in the room is not going to be used against you, you know? So that was a little different.

However, Cathy, through this executive-feedback experience and this follow-up interview was coming to an awareness of several significant aspects of her personality. The primary one has to do with the emphasis in her life on performance. Given her parents' divorce and their driven nature, she has been on a treadmill of performing since childhood.

> I remember my mom sitting me down and saying, "You have to choose just a few sports, I can't get you everywhere anymore, you don't drive, you need to make sure you take it back a little bit." She will even make comments to others today. My mom said, "You know [Cathy], I don't know how she gets it done." I laughed because I learned it from her.

As an indication of her coming to this awareness she said,

> Yesterday we were at the pool and we were talking about the water, and on a hot day everyone want to be around the water. But last year we had too much water and we had floods. . . . It is kind of like my life. Having there be an equal constant. I was having an epiphany, everything in moderation, it can really throw things out of whack.

When she was asked about the pressure to be the best she responded,

> It's funny, because it is not like somebody said you can't. It is funny, when we would get in the car it was not my mom saying I needed to go to practice, it was me. I played _____ and I was not a very good _____, so I would get up at 5:00 a.m. and go to high school and practice. And my coach would see me and I would practice _____ before school for 2 hours. . . . No one said I have to do

> this . . . but I have always known that the people that are great at things put in the time . . . but I never thought about it. . . . But that is how my brain works. . . .
>
> When I leave here I always think, "What is one thing I could have done to make this day better?" I have always thought like that, it might be a phone call to a customer, an extra letter or call that is something that the CEO always thought, that is how I was raised. It might just be to that one person, so that they know I was thinking of them. It is a struggle for me to think that others don't think that way . . . it is funny how you are wired . . . what connects in my brain is different from how others brains connect.

Coming to this awareness, she was realizing the pressure she has put upon herself with all that she tries to accomplish in a single day and that this might not be the most healthy lifestyle for her or her family over time. When asked if she was able to relax, she responded,

> No, that is a struggle for me. I actually took a day off last week and went to the spa on my own. I am trying to do better so I don't go crazy. . . . When my boss will say I don't know how you get this done . . . here at 7 a.m. . . . and get it done then go home and I know it is not relaxing at home, and I said it's fine. . . . But then I started to think about it and thought how many years can you do that without saying I have had enough?

The performance pressure leads to whether or not she really feels successful in her role.

> But it is like it does not matter what you did yesterday . . . it is about today. . . . That is part of our culture. . . . I even have people that say, "I have done this and this," but I say, "Hey, it is 2009."

This further connects to her ability to accept feedback, likely stemming from growing up in a performance-based family where positive feedback and acceptance only came after achievements.

> It was hard to hear that I struggle with getting positive feedback, because if you asked me what my own brain thinks, I would say, "I never get positive feedback." But then I get confronted with positive feedback you don't even receive that . . . but I did it right then and there. . . . Someone in there said, "You do this well," and I just skipped over it, I did not even hear that they were giving me positive feedback.

In an interesting analogy Cathy said that years prior she had a discussion with her supervisor about relating the company to the round treadmill that a rat runs on.

> I had a supervisor that said . . . "[Cathy] . . . that wheel is not this company. . . . That wheel is you, and you have to figure out how to slow that wheel down, maybe you need to realize you don't want to be the rat," and it stayed with me. Even growing up it was like that, there were sports. . . . My mom was good about making sure we were involved in what we wanted to get involved in. . . . She was good about that. You get involved in these sports, and I would say I can't be second best. . . . I need to be the best. I feel at times like I am a rat on the treadmill. . . . My little legs can't keep up.

She observed the problem from an organizational standpoint: "We are taught that we should identify a few people and get them to be mini-yous, absolutely you have to get them to be mini-yous, but you have to give them a ladder to get there." Given her self-expectations, she knew it might be unrealistic to identify and expect the same of others. She indicated that with her coming to an awareness of this aspect of her life, she was able to look at developing individuals differently. However, it continued to be an ongoing struggle, as reflected in the following excerpt from a conversation she recently had with a coworker: "If you perform here, then things can work out, you have to perform. I don't want people to think that you can just come here and it will be a walk in the park."

Cathy was beginning to see how the performance emphasis was being passed along to the next generation "I look at my own kids today, and you can see that determination just going down the line. You instill it in your children." At the same time her parents seemed to be realizing the importance of communicating their proud in Cathy. "My dad will look at me today and say, 'I am so proud of you, what you have done and how you raise your kids.'" However, the affirmation still connects to performance as

evidenced by the statement "what you have done" as opposed to just being proud because of "who you are."

David: Individual textural description. David's experience in the feedback session overall was positive. He described his desire to get feedback on his performance given his lower level of experience and shorter tenure with the company as compared to others in similar positions.

> I think from looking at myself and in all honesty the executive feedback has given me a lot of insight into some core weaknesses that I don't necessarily think shed as much light as it would without having this session I may not have figured out and specifically may not have figured out with my boss there as well.

He reported that it felt good to hear the positive feedback and the reinforcement of his passion, drive, and desire for feedback. However, even though he sought feedback he was hesitant to talk about his own struggles. This left his peers and boss with the job of working to pull information from him; it ultimately came down to a trust issue. Another issue discussed in the session had to do with David's lack of decision-making skills and the time that it takes for him to actually get to a decision. "I don't like feeling like I am making a mistake." He continued, "I think what really stood out that day, I really didn't realize how indecisive I was being behind the scenes when it came to making a decision."

In the feedback session they discussed David's family history. He described his father as a blue-collar conservative who passed on opportunities in his career that might have been too risky because he was trying to make more money for the family. Instead of taking those riskier positions, he earned money in a part-time position. David discussed with the psychologist that he and his mother always had an open relationship, so there

were no major breakthroughs or revelations at the session except for the discussion about his relationship with his father.

> I'll say that what we discussed is my dad and I were always very much, we didn't talk about how much we loved each other pretty, some fake hugs, we knew, just kinda silent love. And the first real time that I ever just called my dad and had that significant discussion about how I felt about him was in 2005.

David reported that the feedback session was made more comfortable by the fact that his boss was willing to open up and share on a personal level his life experiences. His boss sharing helped him to feel more comfortable and accepting of his own experiences and allowed them to talk on a personal level, "which you don't really do a whole lot." He described his biggest learning from the session as related to communication: "I need to reach out to my peers more consistently as well as to my boss." He also referred to his level of decisiveness and his willingness to be vulnerable and not always think that he has to have the answers. Resulting from the feedback session he believed others saw him now as more calm.

> If you would have seen me in my first couple of months, I was a fly by the seat of my pants, react to everything that comes to me throughout the course of the day, versus now having a much more set game plan day in and day out and having a process to execute on that. I labor much less now than I did 10 months ago, because I feel like I have much more controlled management style.

When asked about how he processed what was learned in the session, he indicated that he discussed it with his wife.

> I always tried to be open, and her and I talked about a lot of things, I tell her just about everything. So yeah, she knew about the job and the session and my dad. The first time that I did this session that I did 8 months ago, I came back home and after the session on the plane I had a ton of thoughts going through my head, so I wrote this six- or eight-page letter to her, and we sat on the back deck and opened a bottle of wine and said hey I had a lot to think about.

Overall he called the executive-feedback session spectacular.

> I feel like the psychologist and his team and what they are here to do is, for me it has added more dedication to the company; it has show to me the value this company just puts on leadership, the investment, time and money they spent on the program, it truly amazes me, what they are doing.

David: Individual structural description. David is younger than other participants in the study, as reflected in his learning processes related to the feedback session. His lack of life experiences and maturity seemed to limit the depth of learning, although his willingness to listen to the feedback allowed him to begin to connect his professional struggles to his family structure and the dynamics of his family relationships. David is very competitive, and most of his childhood successes and his confidence were developed through his athletic ability and performance on the sports field. His lack of verbal affirmation from his father and his tendency to focus on the positive and not reveal the negatives make him guarded to some degree. However, through the feedback he received he was learning to expose those vulnerabilities and see them as a way to grow and develop both personally and professionally.

> I saw this environment of being very competitive. I'm an athlete at heart, I played sports all the way through college, and I think this company gave me the chance to transfer that mentality to the work force and to the professional environment, so being that competitive person who is big on teamwork but is also, I was always the one who wanted to win the game but be the MVP, get the game-winning shot, and I think that has been able to translate to this company.

He wanted to be the hero and win the affirmation of his father. He described his father:

> He was never the kind of guy to talk about a weakness or what he was falling short on. It was always what was right, what was safe, though it was interesting to draw a correlation between him and he is my main role model as a child. And even today, I feel like I have stepped out and decided to take many risks that he didn't.

David was being proactive to try to change the level of communication between him and his father and trying to transfer that vulnerability to the communication between

his peers and supervisor in the organization. Upon return from another development session with the same psychologist, David said,

> I called my dad and talked to him for about 2 hours, just about everything going on. And since that session, we tell each other we love each other, we really give each other a hug. And those are significant things for me, and I attribute a lot of that the psychologist. It really turned the corner for me in just opening up to my dad and then him opening back up to me as well.

David spoke in the session as well about his relationship to his brother and his ability to accept the different path that he took in his life.

> He was similar to me until he was about 15 and then he, well literally until he was about 15, he walked in my footsteps identically, and at about 15 years old, sports became the secondary, third, fourth focus for him, he got into _____. . . . I am nowhere near that type of person, we went in different paths, and for a little bit it put us completely on a different page. We, I wanted him to be like me, I wanted him to be focused on school, for him it was like priority Number 10. So we were a couple years, probably 15–18 we weren't on the same page as brothers. . . . When we did have a conversation about life or choices, it didn't go very well, that was probably more driven by me wanting to make him changes, who he wanted to be. And eventually I realized that was who he was happy being and I had to support it. And now we have a very good relationship.

Seeing this connection in his professional career he was able to relate his relationship with his brother to the treatment of others in his office. He wanted others to succeed; he said, "Again directly linked to what we do here, I have had to realize that some people just were not a fit and they needed to have a different career that matched up with their wants and needs and values."

> "Specifically what I took away from the session was really my mentality that I can change peoples' habits that I would look at a person, and say ok, I know she struggles with this, this, and this, but she is good at this, let me change this, this, and this versus just setting the tone. . . .
>
> I think that I was so set on trying to change people who intrinsically just were not going to change, so the last year, probably 7–10 months of my last year, my last 14 months in this role revolved around trying to change what people didn't do well in this company. And that was difficult to do because the majority didn't change, the majority of them aren't here now anyway, when at the end of

> the day I probably could have made that decision on people in 3–5 months versus 10.

Thus, David was taking steps to teach people what needs to be done and to give them an opportunity to perform. If the performance does not take place, he removes them from their position.

With regard to David's ability to make decisions, he was coming to see that the pressure that he exerts on himself to have the right answer and to "win the game for the team" is unrealistic. These gray-area decisions related to personnel and other matters do not always have a clear answer, and the nature of leadership is often a life spent in the difficult gray areas. He was realizing the energy and worry he spent on these decisions and his ongoing struggles with this. In the session he was asked how many times he lay awake in bed sweating over decisions, and his response was,

> I did it all the time, and of course, did I want to say that in front of my supervisor? No, but he needed to hear it. Will I still struggle with it? I'm sure, but I am self-aware of it because of the time spent there a couple of months ago.

In terms of changing his behavior, David was making a concerted effort to develop a deeper relationship with people, recognizing that he does not always have to have the answer and he can expose the vulnerable side of himself and not know the answer. He also now had a core peer group and was building the foundation of those relationships on trust. Finally, with his direct reports in his office he was learning that in coaching them he could recognize the positives rather than dwelling on the negative aspects of their performance.

> I had a guy, hit a specific mark for the first time 2 months ago, and we acknowledged it, but we did not go celebrate. I had never done that before, I glossed right over it. So literally I am looking back on what's going on in the office, and the very next week we went out and celebrated, but it took me 3

> weeks. That cannot happen, so the team acknowledged yes we are starting to focus more on the positives and celebrating the victories, but that has to stay consistent.

Ethan: Individual textural description. With regard to the feedback session, Ethan said that he was anxious to hear the feedback. "I am always curious to see what is going on inside my head, it is interesting, the tests were very long, so I was curious to see what that would say." Given his analytical nature, it made sense that he wanted to see what the data revealed. Looking back on the experience, Ethan realized that he missed an opportunity for richer dialogue. He thought that the session would involve feedback directed at his blind spots, which it did; however, he realized later that the other participants in the session were really inviting him to a deeper level of dialogue than he was prepared for. Perhaps he just needed time to process what he was hearing, but he stated that he might have missed an opportunity for deeper learning.

As his discussion progressed with the psychologist he said that his story was surprising to him.

> Honestly, I have done a lot of self-reflection over the years, my background is kind of not what the psychologist expected, the white picket fence, my father had a lot of struggles when I was younger. You can do a lot of damage without ever touching a kid.

As a result of this volatile environment, Ethan experienced behavioral problems in school.

He reported that his discussion with the psychologist helped him to better understand his life. He disclosed that over his lifetime he developed a temper that he has learned to manage and has worked hard to control in the business environment. He can turn it on and off when needed. The psychologist pointed out to him that maybe he

needed to let a little more of that temper show in the way of passion rather than being so extremely guarded about it to the point of not revealing his feelings about an issue.

Ethan was not really surprised by anything that he learned in the session about his personal history, because of the years he spent in and out of counseling and through ongoing self-examination, however, he was surprised to learn about the professional view others had related to his need to identify his desired path in the organization. They spent time talking about the importance and significance of Ethan's relationship to his grandfather. His grandfather's relatively sudden death left a void in Ethan's life, but from that he learned to enjoy every single day, to get the job done but to enjoy life in the process.

The feedback session was not an emotional one for Ethan.

> I have shed enough tears over it, I have had enough internal anguish, that internal voice that people I have worked so much on quieting that, like, as far as accepting who I am, my background, where I'm at, what I do and embracing it, because I have shed enough tears over my lifetime.

He discussed the struggles of the relationship to his father and his father's difficulty in expressing positive emotions toward Ethan.

> Growing up, there were no hugs from Dad, but I think he has changed a lot with that. He hugs my son, he will hug my son, but he and I shake hands, so that's the game. I need to know that we have a good relationship and that he cares about me, and he knows I care about him, and we have that.

Following the one-on-one session with the psychologist, Ethan's supervisor and his supervisor entered the discussion. He recalled that the discussion with the two other executives in the room centered on support of business partners, growth and development, what he wanted from his career, and what he wanted in the organization.

> It made me realize that I hadn't identified, put the pin on the board and said this is what I'm expecting, this is what I want. Because I have always been about I want to do well in my role, I want to do what the company needs me to do, but I haven't really demanded anything along the way. I think I do know that I expect to move up in the organization, I want to lead a big part of the company.

The feedback helped him to see the need to identify what he wants and make sure that he is communicating that to the senior members of the organization.

When asked about how his behavior actually changed as a result of the executive-feedback session, Ethan said,

> I'd say I have a little more edge about certain situations now. I think I've done a better job with that and having that edge in certain situations and realizing that you can still be frustrated, you can still be angry about a situation and express that in a way that gets your point across pretty well, but you don't have to yell, you don't have to scream, you don't have to curse. You can do that and people can understand what's important and what your passion is and what you're fired up about and why. So I think I have definitely let that out a little bit more since then and actually it feels a lot better more productive in some ways.

In terms of processing what he learned through the feedback session, he primarily has used internal dialogue, although he has had ongoing discussions with his wife and his supervisor about what he learned in the session.

Ethan: Individual structural description. Given Ethan's age, level of maturity, and significant counseling and self-examination through life, this executive-feedback session let him continue to apply what he has learned about himself to his situation at work. Given the nature of his early-childhood environment, his struggle to get beyond what was experienced and learned during those formative years has continued well into adulthood. Since he has shared his story with many over the years through counseling, and because he was familiar with the psychologist who facilitated the session, he was

comfortable going into the session but was unsure what to expect regarding the involvement of his superiors.

Growing up in a volatile environment did not leave a lot of room for attention to his needs as a child. He did not learn a healthy way to express his emotions, and therefore experienced problems in school. As he entered adulthood he learned over time to keep a tight rein on his emotions, but this resulted in difficulty allowing others to get to know him and see his emotions. It is difficult for someone at his age to hear that he needs to be more expressive after years of his mind and body being trained in the opposite way. He is intelligent and understands what others may be wanting from him, yet making the requested change is complicated.

Given his personal history, becoming more relational with senior executives and promoting himself would be a difficult change. He said,

> That is an area that I continue to focus on and develop. I think relationships with senior leadership I developed in that, I used to have a mind set of they are busy, they had all this responsibility, they have all these people reporting into or trying to get their attention for things. If I am self-sufficient and I don't really need anything from them, if I can run my division and not have to seek their advice, well, I'm going to leave them alone.

This mind set is not too different from the volatile environment in which he grew up, where keeping to himself and being independent was the safer route.

The following comment shows why he would struggle with the balance between controlling his emotions and sharing them:

> I am __ years old, seems like I was just working on it, but really it has been such a long period evolving through, that is what I think I have done is pulled back so hard on the reins to try to get it under control from a business standpoint. The psychologist pointed out, "Maybe you need to bring a little of the pendulum back to the middle and share a little bit of that. You have a really good story and background that a lot of people don't always have, and you can draw strength on

> that, and if you can take that passion of fire or when you get a little frustrated or angry with the situation, you can bring it out in a constructive way to make sure that you are giving people the feedback and pushing people to be better, even if it is a situation that has made you mad, if you end up positively impacting people through that, it is something you should probably take a look at." That sunk in a lot with me because I have always been cautious with that, because I know how bad it can get with me.
>
> He discussed the behavior modeling from his father:
>
> As a child you see explosive behavior, you are going to repeat explosive behavior, you are not going to learn certain styles, you are going mimic that style. So when dealing with a confrontation or a situation that got a little heated, it was, ok, this is where I am going. Kids repeat what they see, so I wouldn't, I don't want to sound like a blame, but I think that had an impact on me. Or the situation was stressful at home so it would get released in other areas, so definitely I believe it had an impact.

Although an ongoing struggle, Ethan was taking steps into the areas needing improvement, including asking senior executives to lunch and trying to develop those relationships.

When asked whether others might notice any behavioral changes related to the feedback session, Ethan's answer was interesting because it reflected the changes in his internal beliefs that might not be visible to others.

> I don't think it was that noticeable, the difference to where I had gotten feedback, and honestly I don't think it was that noticeable or dramatic of a difference, but I feel it inside. I feel like it is not being pushed, pushed backwards, so I feel that, and I think it is coming across productively for the staff, and I generally believe that I am doing it for the right reasons.
>
> The following statement reflects a key learning from the session:
>
> I have no embarrassment as far as keeping secrets, because if people really knew this about me, I don't think they would think less of me. I don't feel that way at all. I think, really, at the end of the day it is a good story because I turned out ok. I'm not sure how good I turned out, it is kinda hard, ok, I guess I'm doing ok. . . .
>
> I want to be able to be my natural self around people and that helps with having a relationship and then also just feeling comfortable doing that and not having something going on inside your head telling you ok, you need to say this

> thing, do a certain thing, how to be a certain way. And that's one of the things I have definitely worked on.

When asked how that was going for him, he responded,

> Actually, I think it is going pretty well. A lot of times I don't even hear it there, and I am so much more aware of it when it does come into play when I'm doing something, I'm like ok, I've got this.

Frank: Individual textural description. Frank viewed the pretesting for the executive-feedback session as intense and struggled with it. "I first thought . . . what the hell is this? It is like the SATs." The testing took him 7 or 8 hours, and he had a lot of difficulty because he has never been a good test taker.

Ultimately, he thought the feedback session would include some type of measuring instrument to determine whether he was a good fit for the job. He believed some type of scoring mechanism for the test would determine whether he was a good fit. "So I guess I had a little bit of fear and insecurity in terms of were they going to say, 'Why the hell did we promote this guy?'"

In addition to the psychologist the session included Frank's boss and another executive. Frank described his interaction with the psychologist as "awesome" because he has a keen interest in this type of introspection.

> I am kind of an emotional guy, so I really do enjoy that. People know that I am pretty sensitive and emotional, I open up a lot of times. It is not necessarily a front, but I am a hard-driving, fast-moving guy, so it is hard to break me down to a certain extent, but I think that those people really know me know that about me.

Frank said that the psychologist got the core background on him and his family, taking his upbringing and background and coupling it with his experience, his successes, and his test results. Then, the psychologist tried to correlate this information with who Frank had become, how he interacts with others, his leadership style, and how he gets

along with superiors. Frank struggled to remember the specifics of what he learned, but much of it was related to perseverance because of his childhood. “My childhood was a little unique.” Growing up, Frank’s father was very difficult and Frank did not have a solid mentor. His relationship with his father was an extremely difficult one and he did not get much affirmation. “We basically tied that back into affirmation. I like pats on the back and I like recognition. That was probably the most intriguing thing, that is a very true assessment and it showed up on the results.”

Frank feared his father because he ruled with an iron fist. Frank spent much of his free time during his childhood on the sports field. He described his family as one of the hardest working families that he knows and saw his work ethic a big part of who he is.

> Really the thing that resonates the most with me from that conversation is that my father ruled with an iron fist and had very high expectations in terms of academics and sports. That is kind of how I am at the core, that is how I manage people and the pressure I put on them.

Frank did not remember disagreeing with anything in the session. When his supervisor and the other executive came into the room, much of the discussion centered on communication, letting others know how he feels about them.

> We spent a good amount of time talking about life experiences, me sharing a lot about my life. The psychologist helped to facilitate that by saying, “Here is what [Frank] shared with me, and you guys should understand that these are some of the things that happened to [Frank].”

After hearing his story, Frank’s boss and the other gentleman were able to share their stories as well, which helped to put Frank more at ease.

He described the overall session as lacking in any kind of visible emotion, yet the discussion triggered internal feelings. Processing what he learned primarily has included internal dialogue, and he was working on being more aware of applying what he learned

in certain situations. When asked whether others around him would see a significant difference in his personality or behavior as a result of this feedback session, he paused for a significant period of time and said, "That is a good question. To be honest with you, there is nothing I can put my finger on. I would say that they have not seen a significant difference."

When reflecting back on the process Frank said,

> I feel like it was really good. It was kind of scary the results, kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy, you kind of know what is going on but you don't. It was the first time that anyone has ever correlated, it wasn't really factual information, but it was kind of this is what the results show, and based on our conversation here is what could be directly correlated with that. A lot of it had to do with my core upbringing and family and just me as a person, which was cool. I thought that was awesome; it just kind of gives you a different vantage point.

Frank: Individual structural description. Frank seemed to have a matter-of-fact, straightforward perspective about his experience in the executive-feedback session. He entered into it like many others, with concern about how the results would be used to impact his position with the company and about what his boss would think about his life story. It was comforting for Frank to hear stories from others in the room so as to put his concerns to rest that his was the only non-white-picket-fence story. At the heart of Frank's ongoing struggle is his experience growing up with a very difficult father. He learned some of his father's behaviors such as his ability to intimidate others, to be forceful, and to be pushy to achieve what he wanted. However, he views himself as a deeply emotional person. He spoke of another development experience with 15 of his coworkers: "That 2-day workshop was extremely emotional, I basically cried for like 2 straight days." Yet, his demeanor in the interview showed intimidating strength of voice, lack of patience, and desire to get on with the questions. He seemed to struggle to find a

balance between wanting to be more like his mother, who he described as a saint, and being locked in a prison of having learned more prominent behaviors from his father.

Describing his work experience, he showed the connection to what he has learned from his father.

> I have too high-level expectations at times. I tell people that I expect certain thinking, and then when that does not happen it is almost like, "What is wrong with you?" It is something I have been working on for a while.

When asked about his ability to intimidate others, he acknowledged that, nearly breaking into a smile. "Yes, I think it is more of just an initial impression. Once they get to know me, they are not as intimidated by me." He further commented on his behavior,

> Well early on in my career I did get feedback that I was not approachable because people would come to me and I would get pissed at them or yell at them, or I would tell them that I didn't care what they said, or this is the way it is, or this is what I think.

With the awareness and the connections he made in the executive-feedback session and another feedback-rich group session, he was trying to make changes. Listening to him suggested it would be a lifelong journey for him as with many others. The feedback session helped him to see that his life story is unique and that others did not have these distinct types of issues in their household. He was realizing how those early-childhood experiences shaped who he is today and the positive and negative aspects to that.

Additionally he realized that his ability to lead and manage others well might depend on his ability to alter his natural style and begin making changes in how he communicates with his peers and subordinates. He said that in the session this was tied to recognition:

> I did not get a lot of recognition or affirmation. It sounds a bit weird, that you are not really fishing for compliments, but in everything you have done you have not received the affirmation. And that may be why I like it so much now. And on the flip side the expectation piece is so high, is why I struggle with it. . . .
>
> I will never forget that the psychologist was saying that, through his analysis and our conversation, he was saying that even though that is what I really like, I am very stingy with it from a leadership perspective, meaning that because I have high expectations, then it is almost like if people were meeting those expectations and then I would just say, "Good job, let's keep moving." I would stop and take the time to recognize and make people feel good. So I like it [affirmation and recognition] personally, but I am also stingy with giving it out, which is a real eye opener. Because I know that not everyone thrives off of that, but it never hurts to tell people that they are doing a good job.

He was also becoming more comfortable with sharing his life experiences with others appropriate, which he said would help others gain insight into his behavior. He realized the importance of understanding others and how they best respond.

> Probably the biggest thing is that people are different and like to be treated in different ways and need to be managed in different ways. I basically have learned that through trial and error. I try to pick and choose my battles, in terms when to be pretty intense and super aggressive and when not to be, so that not everyone likes that style. For me I do like it that is was how I was raised. If you were my boss, it is almost like a football coach screaming and yelling at you. You have that determination to prove that person wrong, to show them that you can do it, and so on and so forth. I would definitely say that I don't operate in that way, but I can if that makes sense.

His statement that others would have trouble describing an actual behavioral change in him since the feedback session reflects that for many these changes would not happen overnight. The session seemed to bring them to an awareness of deeper learnings from childhood, but they needed time to reflect and then try to make behavioral changes to adjust. When pressed on whether his employees would say that he became better with positive feedback, he acknowledged that they likely would, as he was giving more pats on the back, although it was uncomfortable for him. He also said that he became more empathetic and was working hard to build a feedback-rich environment.

> It's like when you have an opportunity on a stage of people to tell somebody how they have positively impacted you and your career, and that feels awesome, but part of the experience was asking why have you waited for 6 months. You never get a real opportunity to tell that person. I think there are a lot of people that naturally hold things inside, but to see person after person who I work with on a daily basis, to see them get emotional, to see them dig deep down into themselves and have them tell me how I have positively affected them is awesome. It makes me feel like I am making progress, I am headed in the right direction. These people do care about me, and I care about them. That was awesome, and I think that is why I enjoyed it so much.

Gavin: Individual textural description. Gavin remembered being anxious about the executive-feedback session, but that anxiety was moderated by his existing relationship with the psychologist facilitating the feedback session. "There is a good amount of trust in that he was asking me to do this and promising a benefit out of it." As Gavin took the preliminary tests, he wondered exactly how this information would be used and whether the results on paper would really reflect who he was as a person. He was also concerned that his new boss would not be able to give him any valuable feedback given the short length of their relationship.

He did not remember disagreeing with anything in the session. He felt the results were accurate and was comfortable with the psychologist taking the time to explain the results of the written tests to him. Much of the dialogue between them centered on a marker event in Gavin's life, whereas with others in this study, the focus was more on learned patterns of behavior over time.

> There was a question that asked about any event that shaped your life. I have always known my event, but I never sat down and started to write it. I think it was four pages when it was done, and they give you like a page to write it. So that was good to sit down and reflect and say, hey, that was the point in my life when everything either changed, or it was a milestone in my life.

He remembered back to a plane ride with his father and a lengthy discussion that took place.

> On the plane ride there and the plane ride back I sat next to my dad, and the whole conversation was, hey, you can quit and throw it away, or you can choose to play and not listen to this one coach. I remember the plane ride [better than] I remember the entire trip.

He said that he had never shared the story of that discussion with anyone until this feedback session, not even his wife.

Through the discussion with the psychologist, Gavin said he was embarrassed to realize his perception about advancement in companies and related it back to the conversation with his father.

> Because of those experiences I had with my father and that event, I have kind of been brought up like, hey, whatever you want, as long as you work hard it will get recognized. So leadership was like, to a certain degree I had a mentality of no matter who you know, as long as you do the job you get recognized.

The point is that Gavin never saw the importance of building relationships with those above him. "I had mentally downplayed the need to have those relationships and even downplayed some of the relationships I had with the senior executives."

Gavin also discussed his strong relationship with his parents and the nature of the work ethic instilled in him growing up. His family owned a business and all were expected to contribute during any free time.

Gavin said that the anxiety came back into the executive-feedback session when his boss entered. "This is my new boss who doesn't really know me, and he kind of prefaced this by saying he wanted to get to know me." Gavin did not show much emotion during the feedback session and in fact was asked by the psychologist and his boss if he

could work on letting more of those emotions come out. They wanted him to share his emotions and how he was doing. Gavin said,

> The biggest piece of that emotion piece was that I never show stress or I rarely show stress. So the catch was that managing me or working for someone you are always in a state of unknown, or do I really feel the pressure, do I really understand the pressure of the job? Do I really know what is going on? I am the same way whether we are doing fantastic or horrible.

His boss saying that he struggled with the same thing helped Gavin understand the rationale and to see the benefits.

In all he described his experience as good and remembered being drained on the plane ride home. He felt relief after going through the session because his supervisor got to know him fairly well and they were able to discuss expectations going forward. He has processed the experience through both internal dialogue and dialogue with his wife and good friend.

Gavin: Individual structural description. Gavin is a no-nonsense leader and manager who experienced the feedback session in a straightforward fashion, the same way he approached his sports career. Basically, he believed his performance on the field would speak for itself. The problem is that in an organizational setting, the rules are different than those on the playing field. He learned from this session that besides performing and letting the numbers speak for themselves, a component to executive leadership and growth is developing relationships with the most senior executives in the organization.

> It was almost like the psychologist was scolding me, like regardless of how intelligent you are, you don't see this as an important part of your career, so we spent a good part of the time talking about that. So that was an eye opener, and like I have to put more relevance and importance on the relationships I have with the senior executives in the company.

When asked how his supervisor would respond if asked if he had changed his level of communication, Gavin said,

> He would say 180 degrees. Like I used to be, unless he called me, we did not speak. I had the mind set of, hey, you put me in this job to do a job, so I am not going to call you and ask you how you are doing or what you should be doing . . . but now since March we probably talk an average of two or three times per week. At least one of those is purely social and has nothing to do with the job.

He still struggles with the change. "I understand the importance of it, like I understand the need, but deep down I still struggle with that concept."

The depth of the story regarding the plane ride went further as Gavin shared with the psychologist a story about his father with the ultimate message learned being "if you want do whatever you want, it is your decision, just don't look back on this and say you didn't work hard enough to get this done." His father is really larger than life for him, as reflected in the following comment:

> My house was the kind of house where my friends would come over to go out, and my father would invite them into the living room, and he would tell stories, and we would just stay in all night. I have heard his stories my whole life, but you know they never really click, you listen to your dad your whole life.

When asked how he would describe his father he said, "Virtually the same way I described myself. The same way I think my office would describe me." He had a good, trusting relationship with his father but also high expectations an installation of a strong work ethic. This work ethic has served him well, but he was learning that others might not have that same level of work ethic. He learned to emphasize results rather than the method, but this was part of his ongoing struggle.

> I still catch myself thinking like this person should be doing it this way, but if the results are in line, I sit back, not too far, and ask are they going to get there. And I will always put the favor in the odds of the work ethic piece over, like, pure

> creativity if I had to describe it. But there are a number of people here that have that creative side, so they kind of help keep grounded on that. . . .
>
> The first couple years of this job, no way, like, I lived and learn. But my view was that the work ethic is either there or it is not. I remember getting on people even though the results were there, even though the work ethic did not support it. I would blame it on luck or whatever. I have gotten past there, if the results are there, you can still get people where they need to be.

The psychologist and supervisor's comments regarding showing more of his emotions were difficult for Gavin to process for two reasons. First, it was hard for him to let his supervisor know when he was stressed or overloaded or to ask for assistance.

> All athletes, including myself, are taught that when you are stressed you do not perform as well. Part of me is that way. If I am stressed, it is going to cloud my vision, there is no need to be that way, I can stress afterward. So that piece I think that it might be better—I am not sure I can give you an honest answer on that one—it might be better because I am aware that others think it needs to be better, but internally it is not a point in my life where I say, hey, I need to work on showing my stress. I think you would see a lot of that now, and the stress piece I just don't. If there was a point of respectful disagreement it was the showing of the stress; the potential benefits are not significant enough to change my personality. I am not disputing the fact that there could be benefits, but they are not significant enough. And we discussed that and he agreed, if that's the case then this is my personality.

In terms of resulting behavioral changes from the feedback session, Gavin took it upon himself to reach out to senior leaders in the company and develop those relationships. He gave several examples. He saw the importance of these relationships in continuing to grow and develop as an executive.

> I think it would be difficult to "see" the executive leadership relational changes, but if you actually witnessed the conversations with executive leadership you would witness them a lot more now than you did prior to the feedback session.

Much of his growth was through his experience with learning to control his temper and not feeling so much internal stress.

> The emotional piece, the staff will tell you that I am visually more relaxed and laid back and much more animated than I was a year ago, and there are many

> more fun games just to have fun, as opposed to a year ago, I would have put games on just to drive the business.

As with others in the study, Gavin was making a conscious effort to change some things about himself as related to making more time for his children. He does not want his children to have a father who always works, but he clearly understands and appreciates the sacrifices that his father made for his family.

Henry: Individual textural description. For Henry, the executive-feedback experience was anxiety provoking.

> I mean, anytime that you have to take excessive amounts of tests, which bring about awareness in you and not just kind of who you are and what you like and don't like, but there was intellect-type stuff, and I think in just talking with people who went through it, you are kind of just like, wow, there is just nowhere to go here, you are an open book. I definitely was anxious with that process.

At the same time he was excited to sit in front of others and be exposed, so to speak, and to gain some relief from the demons he had been fighting over the past several years. "Although that causes a lot of anxiety, there is a lot of joy to say, hey, you know, what it's out." Henry stated the information that came out in the feedback session accurately depicted who he was. However, he was concerned that he would be looked at as not a typical employee and the typical person in this culture. He feared being judged because of his story and the impact on his career.

The discussion with the psychologist centered on his upbringing with his family and the difficulties that he experienced:

> Both of my parents struggled, and there are a lot of issues there, and he kind of just did not let me get away with—well, there are issues there. He kind of really kind of said, "Hey, do you understand what that means?" He helped me to stop long enough to say, "Look, do you understand the impact of that?" And the reason that was important was because before we got into the group session he kind of said, "Hey, we are going to talk about some things, and you are going to have to

> tie those back to some of this stuff, and I think it is important to understand how they tie back or else you are just going to keep glossing over it, and eventually it is just not going to make sense." I am like, ok, so he definitely helped me to slow down on that piece, and I have thought about it, but not quite the way that he helped me to think about it.

The psychologist helped Henry to put in perspective the significance of the events in Henry's life as he has developed. Henry noted that everyone has some type of marker events or struggles: "To some degree we all acknowledge them, but to some degree we do not all acknowledge the pain that comes with them." This session helped him to "connect the dots" of years of counseling.

> So things like that as I kind of worked through that process a little bit more, it just helped me to realize, you know, that my parents had some real struggles through life.

One thing that surprised Henry about the feedback session was his score on the intelligence portion of the written testing. Although he had done well in school, he felt he never applied himself because so much of his focus was on the sports field. However, when he came to the company he received encouragement and confirmation of his ability to perform on the intellectual side.

> Nobody ever said, "Hey, Henry you can do this." The first time I ever felt like that happened was in this company. Now my dad always felt like that with sports because I excelled in sports, but intellect was never a strong suit.

Henry was anxious about his two supervisors and their boss coming into the room, "just to see their faces when the psychologist throws out things. I just had general enthusiasm." He was surprised by the insight of the senior executive in the room and the level of discussion that ensued involving all the participants. The most senior executive in the room stated that he believed in Henry's abilities but had concerns about whether

Henry, at this point in his life, was willing to do what was necessary to achieve more. Henry acknowledged that the executive could be right.

The second primary topic discussed with the superiors was their desire to see Henry speak up more in larger meetings, confirming with him that he had good ideas.

His impression of the feedback session overall was a good one:

> It really helps you to look at yourself today and say this is who you are now. You have to determine whether you think the information is really you or is it skewed. But this is where you are today and what got you here, and you have to deal with that, you can't just suppress it, you have to deal with it and say, this is maybe who I am. . . . This environment helped me to get through that because I think it creates a level of confidentiality that is so understood, like, there is so much here, that if you breach that I don't think that would be taken well.

He processed the information from the session primarily with his wife, through internal dialogue and through discussions with a few close male friends.

> You know what is different about this exercise? Like, when you go through counseling, part of it is they are just talking about you. What you don't understand is the relational impact on others. When you have people that can sit down and look you in the eye and say, "This is how I see you," or "This is how you impact me," it is just a different dynamic than just, "Here is your history." . . . This is a relational component where someone is saying to you, "This is who you are to me." That was a very real, that hit me really hard and good, wow, I am really influencing some people one way or another.

Henry: Textural structural description. For Henry, the executive-feedback session had a lot to do with affirmation and allowing himself to be vulnerable in front of others. "The affirmation from that, I mean, you have people around you saying that is who you are and it is ok." The psychologist helped him to reach beyond where counseling had taken him to the point of further application and actually sitting with others to get feedback and affirmation.

> He just says, "Hey, we are going to keep talking about this, because I don't think you are quite there." So he just helped me to connect a lot of the dots, where some

> of the previous counseling helped me to work through some of the pain, you know what I mean? He just helped me to tie it all together, which was good, because before I got in there, it is hard to talk about these types of things with people, like, I mean, I know those guys but . . . he just helped me to connect things a little bit better so that we could talk about things.

The psychologist was able to help him see the link back to his parents and his environment growing up.

> I wanted to play football but my dad was concerned about the injuries, I broke a lot of bones. I wanted to play football, but he didn't want me to play football or to go skiing, where I am now the complete opposite with my kids. They don't really play football or ski, but I am just like, enjoy life! There was this fear built into me, I was just a scared kid. I had anxiety from the time I was little, I just remember being anxious my whole life. It was instilled in me that if you do this, this could happen; if you do this, that could happen. I knew that walking into the session, but I did not know where it came from. I just thought it was me.

Regarding the work environment, Henry heard in the session that he needed to be more vocal in meetings, especially with peers, and that he needed to work on developing relationships with senior executives. He never had a problem developing relationships with his employees but struggled with sharing with superiors. He said he has doubts about who he is and in essence has been "hiding" from them and "hides" even in meetings. This was evidenced by comments such as, "That is where it gets into the person that I want to be may not always fly with what we are trying to create here . . . so that was the challenge I had to work through. . . . Is who I am going to fit here really?"

This issue is not something that Henry can fix overnight. "But you know I am still mapped to it." It remains an ongoing struggle.

> It is still a battle I have to fight, because for me to worry is so natural, it's always almost irrational.

The executive-feedback session was one more step in Henry's journey and helped him to "connect the dots" and see more clearly the source of his anxiety and pain. As he

developed the courage to tell his story he learned that many others struggle with the same issues. They, in turn, shared their stories with Henry.

> I told my wife that there is no greater battle in the world than the battle that is within you. No one can see it and no one can fix it. There are evil forces that battle against you, it is horrible. But you can't act like it is not there. To medicate it does not take it away.

In terms of behavioral changes since the feedback session, Henry indicated that he is more comfortable sharing his story in the right place and at the right time. He also is making an effort to develop relationships with those above him in the organization, although he is not fully comfortable with it. "That is still a hard thing for me, but I feel like I am getting better." He understood the perception that he is inclusive of those who work for him and exclusive of those above him. "That is something that bothers me, because that is not who I want to be, but at times I don't know what the hell to do about it."

Ian: Individual textural description. Heading into the feedback session, Ian was uncertain. A lot was going on at the company at the time, including a transition in the senior executive's role two levels above him. That new individual would be sitting in on the session. Also, Ian was involved in a reduction in workforce. He felt he had a good relationship with his supervisor, which gave him some level of comfort that the experience would be a good one. He spoke of a group feedback session two years earlier that gave him some exposure to disclosure as he shared with his peer group for several hours. He told the story of his life, particularly his biggest marker event. Since two years had passed since that experience, he was excited and hopeful about getting some different perspectives. At the same time he admitted to anxiety because he was not sure, in

comparison to his peers, how he was viewed in the organization and how the data gathered would affect his career.

He had a good sense of himself and believed he knew his strengths and weaknesses.

> So I felt confident there going into it. I knew how I was answering a question, because you get the same question asked five different ways, and knowing that this will not be as effective if I am not as honest as I can be about myself about hey who am I and what are my limitations based on my personal life circumstances or my style, what shaped me through my life experiences growing up.

He reported that he was not shocked by anything, although issues of empathy made him think.

Ian discussed with the psychologist that he is a "good soldier" and "sucks it up to get done what needs to get done" for the job. He believed this allowed him to be successful at his job and in meeting life challenges. They also questioned whether this mentality was healthy, however. The psychologist helped him to tie this attitude to observing his father as he was growing up. Ian's father was the oldest child and had been burdened by a lot of responsibility. He developed a very strong work ethic and did not show much emotion. Ian's mother, on the other hand, struggled with emotional issues.

> I had two pretty divergent personalities, so it probably created a lot of conflict for me, trying to balance myself or learning how best to engage as it relates to myself and my needs from a social standpoint as well as a family standpoint.

This resulted in trouble for Ian in high school and college.

Ian was pleasantly surprised by the results on the intelligence testing. He knew he tended to be introverted, generally comfortable with himself, but hard on himself. He tends to cut others off in conversation because he thinks quickly and wants to move

ahead, which may be a part of the perception of his lack of empathy. He was surprised by the results for empathy; he did not feel he was lacking in empathy because of his compassion for others going through difficult times.

> He talked with the psychologist about his patience level being thin.
>
> People tell me that hey, with what you deal with, you have to have a high level of patience.

His struggle is "navigating how to operate on a day-to-day basis on the relationship side, allowing the feelings part to come out versus just getting through the data piece." They also discussed his zero tolerance for failure and how hard he can be on himself.

> He said I had a zero tolerance there, so I was a little bit disconnected, but as it relates to a zero percent tolerance about how I feel about myself with my self-esteem and confidence and how I feel about myself, I could see that there. Because I am very hard on myself and I do beat myself up a lot, as opposed to saying, hey, you have a lot going on, you have a lot to deal with, you are not going to be perfect at everything." . . . I don't give myself the grace.

The executive-feedback session was not emotional for Ian; his emotions had come out in the group feedback session two years prior. "There was a lot of feelings that had been suppressed in the group feedback session that came through at that point." Once his supervisor and his boss came into the room, Ian felt nervous, unsure how he was viewed by the senior executive in the room. He learned that the executive wanted him to move out of his comfort zone and deepen relationships with others to help when issues arise with others.

Ian stated that the session did not lead him to think totally differently about himself. However, he stated,

> There were some small areas that I will try to look at myself differently now. I think the biggest, with a change is that I try to go into conversations, ultimately at

> our level is that I try to say, hey, let's learn more about ourselves through this conversation.

He came away from the feedback session asking the question "why?" more, trying to understand the deeper aspects of himself. Specifically, he supports everyone else but takes little time for himself.

> I don't handle it [stress] well, I don't have an outlet for it. I need to be able to channel it elsewhere, whether that means getting exercise or getting out to a ballgame, whatever it might be. And that goes back to the good soldier mentality where I support everybody else but I don't support myself. And that is not very healthy. . . .
>
> I don't drink or do drugs, it does not come out in those areas, but where it does come out is hey am I as healthy as I need to be, and do I have healthy outlets to just get it out? You know, get the physical aspect of what that does out of my system.

He processed what he learned in the session primarily through internal dialogue and ongoing dialogue with his supervisor. He was trying to adjust his behavior and the focus of his communications.

> I try and be positive when I speak to that group. I try to be upbeat and passionate and share my thoughts and my feelings with that group, and this is why this is important and this is what it means to us. So I just don't know with the staff whether there is a real definitive noticeable change where they would say they saw a big difference, like it is probably, maybe with the more intimate, smaller management group. I have tried to open up more, stress more, more probably the relationship side because I am stressing it more with myself in regards to holding them more accountable and getting them to think more about themselves and how are they engaging with their people.

Upon reflection of the overall process, Ian said,

> Ultimately I think that it is good, I don't know how many organizations do it. It is another notch in the bedpost as to why I really love the company, because I appreciate the impact that it not only has on me here but what I do at home and trying to be a better person. Because it is a goal of mine to always continue to improve myself, be a better leader, be a better dad, be a better direct report, supporter of my supervisor, or supporter of the people that work for me, be a better supporter of the company.

However, he needed help in meeting his goals and wished for more company follow-up and follow-through after these sessions. He needed tools to make these changes and help with this transition.

Ian: Individual structural description. Ian's learning experience in the feedback session was a hard one that left him with significant challenges in terms of fostering the relational side of his interactions with others. He acknowledged the similarities to his father with regard to the work ethic and the "just suck it up and get it done" mentality. Relating to his mother, he said,

> She was overemotional with me where I would shut it down, I almost wanted to avoid, like she would take offense at times where I think because of her self-esteem she would feel that I did not have love or admiration for her, which was a product of her self-esteem and me wanting to shut down and not engage because it was a product of it was too much because I was probably modeling myself more after my dad.

Ian described at times speaking over others at work and not giving them the time to speak because of impatience. Yet, listening and providing affirmation of understanding are significant parts of any relationship. He was surprised to learn that his empathy level was low, believing himself to be a compassionate person and sensitive to the needs of others. He described compassion for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Yet, for those closest to him the expression of compassion and sympathy through listening and expressing understanding is a challenge.

Ian was comfortable with the rational and matter-of-fact side of life and with his position in the company. His intelligence and rational, decision-making nature make him a good fit for his role. He made many references to the heavy load and high level of expectations for himself. He noted how this was impacting him.

> I have enough on my plate, I have enough going on as it is, can I not get a break? So you know, I think that was probably the biggest eye opener for me that I need to gut check myself, am I becoming jaded? . . . I think that I talked with him about, you know, do I have the energy to offer up the patience to listen to it versus listening to it but not providing the adequate amount of time to really allow that person to fully talk through and share some feelings as it relates to what is going on in our world, or our working relationship, or whatever it may be.

In terms of his ability to perform in his position and grow as an executive in the company, he realized,

> If you really want to get better, you are going to have to think about why you do the things that you do, which really fall back to your dad, or your relationship with your mom, or your personality style and the limitations that come with that if you don't change and use that situation, it is a lot.

With so much going on in his life, he said, "I don't have the antenna up to pick up on the subtle nuances" in relationships with others in the office. For Ian this learning process would challenge him significantly and involve his ability to speak and behave confidently. He spoke with uncertainty about the impact of the feedback session:

> I think it changed, maybe in the sense of the positive feedback that I got, that maybe it sunk in a little bit for me, then opening up the blind spots that I probably maybe kind of somewhat maybe knew that maybe I didn't really fully appreciate probably I was somewhat blind. So I guess from that perspective it changed my perspective about myself.

His rambling words reflect this ongoing struggle.

Ian recently stayed after a company event and spent time with one of his subordinates. He was able to share with him, listen, and deepen their relationship. He recognized that he needed to continue to improve relationships with peers and senior executives.

> So, from a peer standpoint, am I going to have the ability to have good relationships where my trust level with certain individuals? We may not be able to get there, so I recognize it, and it may be trouble for me at times.

He discussed having the opportunity to stand up and discuss his story.

> If they got me up and asked me to tell my story, then I can guarantee that I don't know if I would get through that, I would have to fight to hold back the tears, and I don't know if I am going to be able to do that, because am I going to be able to do that, to communicate the sense of emotion behind it without the physical aspect coming through? My brain will come back in and say, hey, are you crazy?

Jeff: Individual textural description. The thought of the upcoming executive-feedback session was anxiety provoking for Jeff. "I think that anytime that someone is going to lift up the covers, lift up the hood. . . . You know, are they going to find something that I don't want them to find?" He had an existing relationship with the psychologist and trusted him; he was interested to hear what the psychologist would have to say. However, he said, "You know, it's one thing talking to the psychologist about things, but then having your boss and his boss sitting in the room, you know, it creates a different dynamic." Ultimately he told the psychologist that he had nothing to hide and wanted to learn as much as he could from the experience, even if it meant going very deep. "I need these people to help me through some of these things, whatever comes out."

Jeff had a good experience with the feedback session and spent time talking about the separation of his parents. The departure of his father put pressure on his mother to provide the family And in order to help Jeff started working at a young age.

> Every day before school I got up to deliver the papers, every Saturday and Sunday I had to make sure that those papers got out. And, you know, one thing that my mom taught us is that if you wanted something bad enough, you need to work for it. She taught us our work ethic and, you know, and part of it was by design and part was by default. . . .There was accountability, at a very young age.

As a child, because his mother worked, Jeff was on his own frequently, which created a sense of independence that came with responsibility. "You know, it was not like you come home and play; you get your chores done and you take care of yourself."

Jeff and the psychologist discussed Jeff's divorce several years ago.

> The thing that I learned through that, the emotion that I was feeling, I kept feeling like a failure because I could not make the marriage work, but I was really feeling embarrassment. The embarrassment was really about I didn't see that coming before I even got married.

He said that others, including his mother, had concerns about the chances of the marriage succeeding. He found it comforting and reassuring that his supervisor and his supervisor's boss shared similar experiences. He realized that his shame was embarrassment.

> You know, I am a perceptive guy, I believe I am a smart guy, but for me not to see that, I didn't get it. It was embarrassing for me, all these people are around me and they are like, "What are you doing?" But no one said anything.

The executive-feedback experience was not an emotional experience for Jeff. He explained he had spent a lot of time in self-reflection.

> Asking myself why I think the way I do, why do I have some of the fears that I have? When did that start? Because I think back to my childhood, I was always a kid that did well in school, popular, I lived a very normal life as it would appear, and I am trying to think back to see where things started to change for me, when did I start to lose my confidence and self-esteem? I can't put my finger on it, but the psychologist helped to get me there and helped me to understand why I feel the way I do regarding certain things. I think that was the biggest learning for me. I did not walk out of there saying that I know how to fix it; I still have to figure out how to fix it, but he helped me to understand more about why I am the way I am.

Jeff was reassured by his superiors' positive feedback about his job performance and who he was as an individual. His primary disagreement was with the results of the testing, which indicated that he leaned much more to the business side as opposed to developing relationships with others. He was able to give some examples to refute the testing. In the end, the members of the session agreed that it was just something to be

aware of because it showed up in the testing results. They also discussed his inability to accept positive feedback, his discomfort with it, and his tendency to dismiss it.

> The session helped me to see that I need to take some risks and put myself out there and grow in this area, and I think that taking the new role and putting me into a position that I am not as comfortable in, I think it will help me with my confidence. Some people might say that this will hurt you with your confidence, that you might take a step backward, going into a position that might be a bit uncomfortable, but I don't look at it that way. I look at it as I am going into a position that will help me grow in that area, because it is uncomfortable and because I need to grow in that area. It is forcing me to deal with it versus know it is there and not be great with it but live with it. . . .
>
> I don't think it is a fear of learning the job and doing a good job, it is more about being an impactful leader and having the confidence to be an impactful leader in the new role. I don't want to just do a good job, I want to set the bar in that job. Unless I let some of those fears and inhibitions, unless I set those aside, I will never be that. I am forcing myself to go and do that.

He did not believe others would have seen much of a change in his behavior since the session.

> I think I do a good job of masking what I feel internally. If you went out and asked people if I had low self-esteem, they would not know. I do not walk around with that as my persona. You can't, you gotta walk around with confidence, but that does not mean that you don't feel certain things on the inside. They would not say that anything has changed; it is more things that I struggle with internally.

He said he processed most of what he learned through internal dialogue but also had sounding-board discussions with his wife.

> You know, what I need to work on is not going to be fixed overnight. It has taken many years to get here, and it will take me many years to get to where I want to be. It is a journey that I am taking; she is helping me along that journey.

When asked to comment about how he felt after the session he said,

> I felt positive and felt like I learned something and it was worth going through. I have a lot of positives to build on and need to focus on them. At the same time, I need to lean on my support system to help me in the other areas.

Jeff: Individual structural description. Jeff's interview was among the shorter of the 11 interviews completed. He was matter of fact about what he had learned and what he was continuing to struggle with. He was in the younger age range of the individuals in this study, and much of what he was exploring seemed fresh for him. He had fewer years of experience and adult self-reflection.

Jeff's parents' divorce and financial struggles obviously became a part of the fear Jeff carries with him. He learned to work hard and then work even harder and take on additional responsibility in order to survive. He also learned to depend heavily on himself and became independent.

> You'll probably find a theme that I work a ton. I was working at _____, I was going to school full time. So a lot of days I would get up and go to work , then I would go to school, then at night I would go to _____ and work until 10:00 p.m., then come home and do homework, and then do the whole thing the next day.

He showed a warm personality and seemed a solid, personable supervisor. Yet, he continued to struggle with imposter fears.

> You know, my dad left when we were young, and so probably to a degree a sense of abandonment, my mom was left with the kids and trying to struggle to get by and having to purchase things for us at thrift stores. But yet my dad sent us to good schools, private schools, so I am around a bunch of people that are very wealthy and I have this image that I have to uphold. But yet I am here buying clothes at a thrift store. So there are the imposter fears that come along with that.

He stated he needed to work on his confidence but questioned how. "The question for me and the challenge for me is how I overcome it?" With regard to his self-esteem and his confidence, he said,

> I think I have gotten a lot better, but I know that it is still an area that I need to work on. . . . I am working on these areas, but I don't know what that looks like yet. I have talked with my wife about going to talk with someone about it to help me figure it out, but I have not quite gotten there yet. I have tried to go online and do some reading about it and trying to understand what the drivers are.

His self-reliance has served him well, but he was continually learning about relying on others, especially team dynamics within his division.

> I think that I have to learn that you can't do everything. The higher that you get, you need to impact things through others, you can't do everything, you have got to be able to provide direction and guidance and teach. I think a big component and where people miss opportunities, it is a lot easier to get in and get it done, where teaching takes a lot of time to do. We are all busy and we need to get it done. We are all on time lines. As an executive you have to make sure you are teaching the people around you how to do what you do as well as you do it, so that they can be successful and you can then increase your influence.

This was a perceptive statement. Jeff seemed to have the ability to do just what he was espousing.

As a result of the executive-feedback session, Jeff was also trying to provide more positive feedback and to take the time to celebrate the successes of the team before moving on to the next task. Additionally, he had become more comfortable with sharing some of his story, especially what he learned and experienced through his divorce.

> I let things happen to me, and I learned that you can't let things happen to you, because you will end up in a place where you don't want to be. Take ownership of your own destiny and drive your own outcomes. Because if you end up in a place where you don't want to be, you have to look back at yourself. So I was trying to teach them a life lesson that I learned, on a different scale, but I try to use things like that to provide guidance.

Keith: Individual textural description. Heading into the executive-feedback session, Keith reported feeling optimistic but nervous. The session was more difficult than he had expected. He described his time with the psychologist as uneventful, basically discussing background information and family history prior to the discussion with his supervisor and his supervisor's boss. Keith was somewhat dismissive about the whole experience, saying that the time with the psychologist probably lasted less than hour, short in comparison to others' experiences.

Keith's parents divorced when he was young. He described the divorce as amicable because his parents stayed within the same town and he spent time with both while growing up. "I didn't like conflict because like I didn't want conflict between my mom and dad." He believed that this marker event drives him in many ways because he often wants things to be "good." He described his high school and college years as normal. He revealed that his father died a few years ago after going through a rough patch in life.

Once his supervisor and his boss were in the room, Keith was surprised by the test results, which showed that he did not seem to enjoy people or leadership. He said that he enjoyed leadership and the responsibilities and he disagreed with the results. A lengthy discussion ensued, and the session turned for the worse. He remembered beginning to get feedback and becoming defensive. One senior executive described Keith as passive aggressive at times, which Keith acknowledged as correct. Although he knew that he could be passive aggressive, he would not have expected others to think the same. He knew, however, that his wife was well aware of that trait in him.

Confidence was a topic discussed, especially in dealing with difficult issues. Keith received feedback that he should pick a side and stick to it and not be so easily swayed. They discussed that conflict can be healthy in driving toward a good outcome for the company. Keith's response was, "I understand it, I get it, but my natural style is to avoid it. Clearly I have an issue with conflict, but I have trouble seeing it. I don't know why."

After the feedback session Keith felt he had missed an opportunity and was anxious. To process what he learned, he talked to his wife and listened again to the tape. However, he was unsure that he had taken enough time to process the experience.

Keith: Individual structural description. Keith began by describing his leadership style as being laid back and letting his team of individuals work on their own, because of the length of time they have been with the organization. Keith's interview was the shortest of the 11. Clearly, more was going on than Keith was disclosing.

Keith did not take advantage of the opportunity to learn from the executive-feedback experience and to understand more about his leadership style and areas where he could continue to grow and develop. He admitted to passive aggressive tendencies. The divorce of his parents clearly came at a critical time in his life and significantly impacted him. Although he did not disclose much of the details surrounding the divorce, it left him with a strong avoidance mentality regarding conflict and difficult discussions. Others perceived a lack of passion and leadership desire in him, and he was uncertain how to respond to that feedback. Much of the feedback caught him off guard, and he did not know how to respond. He also did not take the opportunity to ask further questions and engage in healthy dialogue. All in the room left the session in an awkward state. Keith said,

> I probably could have done more to get into the conversation, but I didn't know what to do with it. I took it and listened to it. I mean, right or wrong, there is a reason you are thinking that, so we didn't have a great discussion about some of those, because they were just waiting for me. Like, what do you want from me? I struggled from a where do we go from here? What do you want me to say? What are we trying to get out of this thing? So it did not do it justice, I am not sure we got where we wanted to go. . . . When I look back at it I feel like I missed something there for myself, personally.

That struggle seemed to represent the theme for the session with Keith, unlike the other participants. Keith reflected,

> Maybe looking at those markers and saying that there is more to this than I would have gathered, I mean, there are always those pieces. Going through the events of your life chronologically and understanding the impact that they have and where things change. How those things deep down make an impact or create who you are many years down the road. They are there for everyone, but figuring out what they mean, you go places you would not have gone. I need help with that type of stuff, going deeper with it.

Keith would benefit from and needed additional assistance to make sense of this experience and the feedback he had received. He was making efforts to approach conversations with the feedback in mind regarding confidence and openness to conflict, but it was on ongoing struggle. When asked if anyone was helping him, Keith said,

> That is something I need to ask about. . . . I have probably not processed it to the degree I needed to so that I can move forward and get better with it. It is something I need to do. It would be helpful to have help with processing.

Section 4: Composite Textural-Structural Description

Finally, the researcher used the above analyses to construct a composite textural-structural description of the "meaning and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Although Moustakas calls for the development of an individual textural structural composite for each individual, this researcher viewed that step as unnecessary given the rich descriptions provided in each of the individual textural and individual structural descriptions. The composite textural and structural description for the group developed by the researcher was based on the summaries presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Summary of Textural and Structural Descriptions

Individual	Textural	Structural
Aaron	Safe, trusted environment	Awareness: Work ethic, being successful vs. feeling successful
Beth	Anxiety, openness, and opportunity for learning	Awareness: Intellect and accomplishments, lack of affirmation
Cathy	Cautious, guarded, troubled	Awareness: Difficulty with positive feedback, extreme work ethic and expectations, seeking approval
David	Trusting, safe environment	Decision making, pressure to have the right answer, seeking affirmation and approval
Ethan	Curious, not as open to the dialogue	Significance of story, awareness of need to not control emotions, does not want to hide
Frank	Insecurity, awesome experience	Awareness: significance of story intimidation, high expectations, seeking approval and affirmation
Gavin	Existing trust, comfortable, anxiety with new boss	Marker life event, work ethic, senior relationships
Henry	Fear, relief and enthusiasm, freedom	Awareness: Anxiety and distance, significance of story
Ian	Uncertainty, anxiety regarding perceptions of others	Awareness: Empathy and relationships, self-care and self-talk
Jeff	Anxiety, trust, nothing to hide	Awareness: Imposter fears, confidence and self-esteem—seeking acceptance, work ethic
Keith	Anxiety, difficulty, periods of silence, defensiveness, missed opportunity	Awareness: Passive aggressive behavior, stuck

Although nervousness, anxiety, and fear were the most common feelings reported by the participants in the study, they also reported curiosity, excitement, and a concern about the accuracy of the data. Several reported that they saw the session as an opportunity; these individuals knew that they would be the center of a 3- to 4-hour discussion. The relationship with their supervisor and the competence of the psychologist

were factors that determined how they experienced the session. Almost all described a trusting, open environment where they felt comfortable becoming vulnerable, especially as their supervisors shared what they had learned in their executive-feedback session.

The participants saw this experience as an opportunity to reflect on their life experience and to receive feedback as to how they are perceived by others. Each took the opportunity, to varying degrees, to explore his or her developmental years, parental relationships, and significant marker events. The depth of their stories and the resultant learning often surprised the developing executives. Their family backgrounds varied and included a range of experiences: verbal and physical abuse by a parent, alcohol and drug abuse, extreme work ethic of a parent, the death of a parent, lack of family expression of emotion, divorce of parents, trouble in school, and others. For many, these stories held shame and embarrassment, but they saw how these events shaped who they became, what they believed about themselves, and how they interacted with others.

Many, but not all, reported that the executive-feedback session was emotional, with significant emotional fatigue following the session. Through the discussion with the psychologist, most were able to see the impact of their experiences on them as individuals and as leaders within this organization. For most it meant a reinforcement of positive behaviors as well as a deeper discussion of areas of struggle. These areas of struggle included imposter fears, significant anxiety, an inability to cultivate relationships with subordinates and superiors, a lack of emotional expressiveness, an aversion to conflict, and an unrelenting work ethic. The psychologist was able to bring the participants to a new level of awareness of the source of these deep areas of struggle, and

the supervisors were able to directly correlate the struggle to issues in the work environment.

This executive-feedback session was a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991). The experience began for all as a disorienting dilemma as they began to examine their taken-for-granted understandings of themselves and their family upbringing. This 1-day session proved difficult for the participants to process, however. Having gone through the experience in the previous 2–9 months, many were still trying to reconcile and process all that had been discussed.

Clearly an ongoing struggle for these executives was processing and applying what had been learned through this session. Behavior patterns or sensitivities had become engrained learnings for most over the past 27–46 years. Learning to undo what was engrained or to see themselves in a different way presented a significant challenge. Most of the processing for the participants was through internal reflection and dialogue, although a few processed the experience with a spouse or close friend. Many expressed their concern over changing aspects of themselves that were hard wired into their personalities. They reported a need for the company to provide follow-up or ongoing coaching, with some acknowledging their need for counseling or therapy to help with the resolution of their issues. Nevertheless, most were making attempts to "try on" new ways of being in the workplace and at home. For some this meant attempting to internally change their self-perception. For example, when encountering a certain situation and experiencing fear or self-doubt, they might ask themselves where that particular feeling was coming from and if it was rational or irrational.

Some had heard the feedback before or had spent time in prior counseling and were generally aware of their issues. These participants experienced this session as a way to "connect the dots." They realized that their journey of leadership and life was not an easy one and significant learning remained. Henry said, "I told my wife that there is no greater battle in the world than the battle that is within you. No one can see it and no one can fix it." In those words lies the challenge for these individuals.

The participants realized the extent of the shame and guilt they carried from childhood experiences and were beginning to see these stories as a source of strength. Sharing these stories selectively with others in the workplace can result in personal and organizational growth and increased effectiveness. They realized that this may be counterintuitive in many workplaces and that sharing of this magnitude may be perceived as a weakness; however, this is where the importance of the creation of a trusting culture is vital. All of the participants noted that this organizational culture is caring, with open and honest feedback as well as trust that disclosures will not be used against one. This finding speaks as well to the importance of this executive feedback, starting with the most senior members of the organization and working its way downward through the culture so that each supervisor involved in a feedback session had experienced a similar session with his or her respective supervisor. Henry said, "So the more sharing of the story and the more other people coming back and saying, hey you know what, wow, it is great to see you got through that. It is almost counterintuitive." These executives also realized this experience was unique. They did not know of any other companies offering

these types of development experiences and described it as a unique opportunity and benefit to working for this organization.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter 4 the researcher has provided a thorough exploration of the experiences of the participants for this study. Extensive descriptions provided a thorough understanding of not only the individual's experience, but also the experience of the group. Chapter 5 presents the conclusions from the study and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study was a phenomenological study of developing executives' lived experience through a corporate, executive-feedback, development process. This feedback process was designed to help developing executives to connect their childhood experiences and the events that shaped their lives to their current leadership roles within the organization. This developmental process, carried out in one specific organization, is certainly unique in the executive development arena. Using the framework of Mezirow's (1981,1991) theory of transformative learning, this study provided a rich description of how executives experienced this executive-feedback process and its impact on their executive roles and resulting behaviors.

After studying leadership for six decades, Bennis (2007) said that he was "struck by how small the body of knowledge of which I am sure" (p. 5) and indicated that individuals who study leadership "will have to invent new scholarly forms, new formats that allow us to be expansive and rigorous" (p. 3). Bennis continued, "One of the greatest challenges for students of leadership is to find an academically respectable way to deal with the value laden nature of the subject" (p. 3). In this spirit this researcher commenced the study. This study shines the spotlight on the hidden aspects of leadership, the internal struggles, the internal decision-making pressures, and the belief systems that are so difficult to sketch out on paper in some type of model or theory.

Listening closely to the voices in this study reveals the depth of the struggle in executive leadership. In many ways the complexity of the executive-feedback experience and the journey that follows is similar to the human struggle that all individuals endure

on some level, which is that of understanding and accepting one's self and then understanding and accepting one's self in relation to the world and to others. In taking the role of an executive, individuals are forced to confront themselves and their relationship with the other because of the nature and requirements of the position. Hackman and Wageman (2007) suggested that researchers need to stop focusing on what should be taught in leadership courses and begin understanding how to help leaders learn. This study of developing executives makes strides toward their suggestion.

The purpose of the study was not to develop a new theory of leadership, as so many already exist, but rather to better understand the development process of executives as they learn to examine and understand their mental models and how these mental models influence their daily behaviors and beliefs. In their stratified skill development model, Hogan and Warrenfelz (2003) identified four skill types that organizational leaders must develop: (a) business, (b) leadership, (c) interpersonal, and (d) intrapersonal. Of these, intrapersonal skills are the most difficult to develop but are also the most important for leaders at the top of organizations. Intrapersonal skills are related to concepts such as self-esteem and self-control. The development of these skills was the focus of this study.

The importance of the role of executives in society cannot be underestimated, as evidenced by the recent catastrophic events on Wall Street that led to the worst recession in years. Yet, the question for this researcher became not "What do we really know about these executives?" but rather, "What do these executives really know about themselves, and do we give them the opportunity for this type of learning as they are progressing up

the corporate ladder?" As Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007) said, "Changing oneself is often the most difficult task executives have to handle in their life or career" (p. 383).

People have high expectations for leaders but often forget that these executives are not perfect. They have dreams, aspirations, hurts, fears, doubts, and moral dilemmas. For some of them, their pain runs very deep and all of their stories are human stories. One of the most telling statements was from Ethan: "You can do a lot of damage to a kid without ever laying a hand on him." Ethan now runs a large division of a corporation and is responsible for the careers of many. This study took a closer look at the personal stories behind the executive façade and uncovered the depth of the familiar human struggle.

Buchel and Antunes (2007) identified a gap in the literature on executive development between the practice of executive development and the research done to understand and improve it. This study answered the call to fill in that gap and answered the call for further study of transformational executive development programs (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). Further, one of the most important questions to come form this research was, "Why is a process like this one important for developing executives?" In other words, what is unique to the executive position that makes this type of self-learning experience important? This is further discussed in this chapter.

Mezirow's (1981, 1991) theory of transformative learning was used as the framework to examine and understand the learning experience of these executives. The trigger for learning to occur for Mezirow is a disorienting dilemma that presents the learner with a new perspective on an existing mental model. This disorienting dilemma is

the trigger for reflection and learning to begin. In this study the executive-feedback session served the role of the disorienting dilemma. Adult development, according to Mezirow (1994), "means the progressive realization of an adult's capacity to fully and freely participate in rational dialogue, to achieve a broader, more discriminating, permeable and integrative understanding of his/her experience as a guide to action" (p. 226). This is the journey described in the following pages. This chapter presents interpretations and conclusions based on the findings and discusses their implications for learning and executive development. Finally, the chapter presents recommendations for theory, practice, and future research.

Interpretations

Research approach and primary result. This qualitative, phenomenological research study sought to understand the lived experiences of developing executives who progressed through an in-depth professional development experience. A degree of subjectivity and bias is associated with any qualitatitive, interpretivist study, which the researcher tried to address through the process of epoche. "The challenge of the epoche is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86).

The study sought to answer the question, "What is the lived experience of the developing executives who progress through a feedback session designed to connect early-childhood and young-adult experiences, beliefs, and marker events to present-day leadership behaviors?" The intent was to listen deeply to their experience to learn about

the transformative learning experience (if it was experienced as transformative) and then to understand the process through which these executives understood and incorporated what was learned into their way of interacting with and leading others. The study is significant if for no other reason than to listen and interpret the deep internal struggles experienced by these individuals through the presentation of thick, rich descriptions (Creswell, 2003) of their development experience.

This study resulted in a compilation of executive voices seeking to learn and understand deeper aspects of themselves. Ranging in age from 27 to 46, each was at a different place along the journey of seeing, understanding, and applying what each learned through this process. All experienced the process as disorienting as they came to examine more closely the mental models they hold of themselves and of their childhood experiences**.** Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) made the point "that the most important thing about which managers need to be educated is human nature in general and their own particular nature in particular" (p. 74). Hogan and Warrenfelz continued, "The most important lessons that executives can learn are twofold: (1) evaluating the mental models that they hold regarding their capabilities and others' expectations of their performance; and (2) how these mental models are expressed in overt or behavioral terms" (p. 76). The primary result of this study was a more thorough understanding of the deep internal struggle associated with this type of executive development and the nature of the executive position.

Thematic results and conceptual framework. This section provides a brief reminder of the themes that emerged from the study as well as a brief discussion and

review of the conceptual framework. Seven themes emerged: (a) feelings of anxiety and fear about the executive-feedback session, (b) coming to an awareness of an aspect or multiple aspects of themselves, (c) seeing connections from early childhood to present-day behavior both inside and outside the workplace, (d) an ongoing struggle to incorporate what was learned, (e) an effort to apply what was learned to the workplace, (f) significance of the context of company culture to learning and leadership development, and (g) a desire to disconnect learnings from the next generation. The conceptual framework was a model of overlapping transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and executive development. At the point of overlap was the examination of the executive-feedback development experience.

Conclusions

Below, the researcher presents conclusions resulting from the research study related to the original three research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of developing executives who progress through a feedback session designed to connect early-childhood and young-adult experiences, beliefs, and marker events to present-day leadership behaviors?
2. In what ways do these developing executives experience this process as transformative?
3. What has been the impact of this executive-feedback experience on them as leaders?

This study and its findings are unique because it examines the transformative learning process in an executive development context. Below is a discussion of the conclusions generated by this study.

Conclusion 1: Trust fosters the transformative learning experience for developing executives. Although the participating executives entered the executive-feedback session with fear and anxiety, most reported that these feelings were tempered by an existing trusting relationship with the participating psychologist and their immediate supervisor. In those instances where the prior relationship did not exist with the psychologist, the participants reported that the psychologist immediately put them at ease through the initial dialogue and continued checking in with them through the session. "Given the anxiety provoking nature of asking people to analyze critically the assumptions by which they habitually live, it is critical that educators find ways of doing this that are acceptable and non threatening as possible" (Brookfield, as cited in Mezirow, 1990, p. 180). Taylor (1997), in his review of studies of transformative learning, discussed the importance of establishing relationships in the transformative experience. "It is through trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding" (Taylor, 2007, p. 179). Taylor (1997) indicated research revealed a "learning process that is dependent upon collaboration and creation of support, trust, and friendship with others" (p. 53). This was the type of environment created in the executive-feedback session.

With regard to the creation of transformational executive-education programs, Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007) noted the importance of creating a trusting relationship

between the educator and the participant. Further, Kets De Vries et al. (2007) stated, "Most psychotherapists, although they may have a great deal of clinical experience, do not have the kind of training to diagnose problems of executive leadership" (p. xlix). In this study the participants reported professionalism, comfort, and trust in their interactions with the psychologist. Both of the psychologists used by this organization have become internal consultants to the company over the previous 10–15 years. Employees therefore have come to see these psychologists as trusted members of the organization. This comfort level translated into a greater willingness to disclose deeper parts of themselves and to become more vulnerable. This allowed for greater self-exploration, which created a greater sense of awareness and allowed for deeper learning to occur.

The only participant to report a struggle with trust in the session was an individual who was surprised to find a certain peer enter the room following the initial discussion with the psychologist. She reported that the presence of this individual in the room, whom she viewed more as a peer than a superior, made her uncomfortable and likely led to a lack of full disclosure on her part. This ultimately led to a limit to the depth of what was explored and limited her learning from the session. It was interesting to find that the only participant to express a concern about trust seemed to have a more limited learning experience from the session.

According to Mezirow (1994), discourse is an important component in the process of learning. Discourse refers to "that special kind of dialogue in which we focus on content and attempt to justify beliefs by giving and defending reasons and by examining

the evidence for and against competing viewpoints" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225). Because discourse is central to communication and learning, it occurs in ideal conditions. In these ideal conditions, the participant will

> 1) have accurate and complete information, 2) be free from coercion and distorting self-deception, 3) be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively, 4) be open to alternative points of view and care about the way others think and feel, 5) be able to become critically reflective of assumptions and their consequences, 6) have an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse, and 7) be willing to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus. (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225)

In this study these conditions clearly existed for the participants to have healthy and direct discourse.

"The importance of relationships was found to be the most common finding among all of the studies reviewed" (Taylor, as cited in Mezirow, 2000, p. 307). Additionally, Taylor reported the importance of the authenticity of the instructor or facilitator. This study basically confirms both of these concepts as important in the process of fostering the transformative learning process**.**

Conclusion 2: A learning culture with ongoing opportunities for deep transformative learning to occur fosters the transformative learning experience. Taylor's (2007) review of the theory of transformative learning revealed that one of the larger questions remaining is about the role of context in the learning process, with the role of culture being often overlooked. Although the study of this entire organizational culture was not at the center of this research and gaining a complete cultural understanding was limited by what was disclosed about the organization to this researcher, several participants referred to the importance of other developmental experiences they had completed within this organization. In addition to this individual

feedback session, the psychologists facilitate multiday workshops with executive teams. These 3- to 5-day workshops give the individuals an opportunity to get to know their superiors, peers, and team members on a deeper, more intimate level in what is reported as a safe and trusting environment. Several participants reported that their participation in these workshops offered them the opportunity to learn about themselves and others through revealing often hidden parts of themselves to others in the room. Knowing that their supervisors had been through these workshops as well helped to foster a comfort level that these types of developmental activities were accepted as the norm in the culture. Although not explored in great depth, several reported these and other experiences as deeply moving, emotional, transformative experiences.

Participants reported that their supervisor sharing his or her life experiences and what was learned from his or her feedback session allowed them to feel more comfortable self-disclosing. This disclosure from the supervisor then helped to strengthen their working relationship. Knowing that this and other developmental experiences emanated from the top of the organization and flowed downward gave the participants a sense that this type of development was engrained in the culture and fostered a willingness in them to participate and disclose. Another unique aspect of the culture created within this organization was the description of the relationship and bond that was described between supervisor and employee. Several of the participating developing executives described their relationship with their supervisor as one of brother and sister or even as best friend.

With respect to the culture of deeper learning, confidentiality was placed at an extremely high level of importance. The psychologist, the supervisors, and other

executives involved showed a clear understanding of its importance. No participants reported any breaches of their confidential information or use of their information in a harmful way. In his interview, Henry said, "This environment helped me to get through that, because I think it creates a level of confidentiality that is so understood, like, there is so much here, that if you breach that, I don't think that would be taken well."

In summary, the learning culture created by this organization included skilled and known facilitators, a series of developmental experiences (both individual and group) familiar to the executives in the company, a top–down structure for disseminating executive development so that supervisors experience certain developmental activities before their subordinates, and a high level of importance given to the confidential nature of their experiences. Mezirow (1990) suggested, "Adult learning takes place both in a social context and in the context of meaning perspective. . . . It is interactive and inter-subjective from start to finish" (p. 364). These combined cultural factors strengthened the participants' willingness to be fully engaged in this executive-feedback experience. This finding confirms McCauley and Van Velsor's (2004) reiteration that successful, intense development efforts need to encompass several development experiences that provide a well-rounding experience rather than just a single, focused experience that limits the individual's opportunity to build on what has been learned. Further, in the member-checking process some participants revealed that within the months following the executive feedback process they had participated in a 360-degree feedback process with coworkers. This process allowed them to further work through what was learned in the executive-feedback process. The participants indicated that they gained tangible action

items from the 360-degree process that were missing from the executive-feedback experience.

Conclusion 3: Systematic follow-through is critical to the achievement of the desired outcomes of the transformational executive development experience. Developing executives need assistance in further understanding this type of experience. Mezirow's (1991) theory grew out "of studies that have found that it is not so much what happens to people but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, their hopes, their contentment and emotional well being, and their performance" (p. xiii). Through this experience individuals discuss very deep aspects of themselves, much of which they do not consciously explore regularly, much less in the presence of others including their supervisor. What they learned was disorienting and often confusing. Unfortunately, this session was a half day only. Then these executives went back to their offices, ultimately leaving them on their own to process what had happened. This left each to his or her own journey, and this clearly was a fatal flaw in the development process for this organization.

These executives came to an awareness of certain aspects of themselves but often were left uncertain as to where to go from there. A deep, ongoing struggle ensued. Some looked to their supervisor for ongoing mentoring help; others hoped to learn about their particular issues online but seemed lost; and others seemed to have put the learnings in a mental closet, pledging to revisit them at some point in the future.

A skilled helper to assist in fostering these learnings is vital. When belief systems, habits of mind, frames of reference, meaning schemes, and meaning perspectives are revealed, these individuals struggle to make sense of all of it. Jeff said,

> I am working on these areas, but I don't know what that looks like yet. I have talked with my wife about going to talk with someone about it to help me figure it out but I have not quite gotten there yet. I have tried to go online and do some reading about it and trying to understand what the drivers are.

This concept of structured follow-up is not foreign to the corporate world, given the presence of executive coaches in various roles as internal and external consultants. This difficult process of critical-premise reflection requires assistance and ongoing dialogue, which is not provided by this organization. The achievement of the desired outcomes of the developmental activities is limited by this lack of follow-up. Mezirow (1981) recognized, "The passage involves difficult negotiation and compromise, stalling, back sliding, self deception and failure are extremely common" (p. 8). Mezirow (1981) continued, "The decision to assume a new meaning perspective clearly implies action, but the behavior that results will depend on situational factors, the knowledge and skills for taking effective action and personality variables" (p. 20).

The results of this study suggest that several of these developing executives are in Mezirow's (1991) Stages 5–9. Stage 5 is exploration of options, new roles, relationships, and actions; Stage 6 is planning a course of action; Stage 7 is acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; Stage 8 is provisional trying of new roles; and Stage 9 is building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.

Conger (1993) observed that the most serious problem in the development of leaders "is that most companies have allowed leadership development to become a

haphazard process" (p. 46). Day (2000) discussed the executive-coaching process and indicated that often the success of coaching and the 360-degree feedback process depends on the degree to which they are interlinked; follow-through assists the participant with incorporating the feedback into new behaviors. The benefit from this interlinking was demonstrated in the current study through the member-checking process with those participants who had also recently completed the 360-degree feedback process.

In the Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) model presented in Chapter 2, participants develop a hierarchy of skills for the developing executive: business, leadership, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. Intrapersonal skills are related to emotional security, self-esteem, and self-control. Hogan and Warrenfelz indicated that intrapersonal skills are the most difficult to develop. The responses in the interviews for this study regarding an ongoing struggle to incorporate what was learned in the feedback session confirm the complicated and difficult nature of this integration. Although intrapersonal skills are harder to develop, they are important for the application of interpersonal, leadership, and business skills. As an example, Ian said, "I have a tough time coming away with tools or ways to continue to focus or explore it post–executive feedback".

Kets de Vries and Korortov (2007) explained,

> They need the skills to edit the script for their inner theater, even if they fall short of rewriting it. But this kind of inner transformation can only take place once a new way of looking at things has been internalized. Internalization is a gradual process by which external interactions between self and others are taken in and replaced by internal representations of these interactions. (p. 384)

Kets de Vries and Korotov continued, "Change is difficult, and changing oneself is often the most difficult task executives have to handle in their career. Even the best-intentioned people rarely manage it single-handedly" (p. 383). Without a purposeful, systematic,

follow-through structure, the participants are left alone to struggle with a difficult process.

Conclusion 4: The executive development experience is deeply personal and individual and parallels our life's journey, especially as it relates to seeking approval and acceptance. What surprised this researcher most about the study was the depth of the internal struggle and the deeply personal journey of these executives. At the root of the journey for many was a framework upon which they had built their lives and belief systems, typically around a deep need for acceptance and approval. Given their experiences, they ultimately wanted to know that they were loved and accepted for who they had become. They wanted acceptance from others and from themselves. Several perceived that they would gain approval and acceptance through their work ethic and accomplishments. One of the participants found that acceptance through his faith.

This particular path of development for executives is unique, given the depth to which these individuals explore their past. They learn about the deep roots of their anxieties and fears, their addictions, their emotions or lack thereof, their lack of confidence and self-esteem, and perhaps their feelings of abandonment. They also learn and explore feelings resulting from such issues as divorce, mental and physical abuse, and parental addictions. They are challenged to explore parental relationships, significant marker events, and early relational experiences. This process shines a light on what many prefer to keep hidden and in essence forces them to explore their unconscious and habitual ways of behaving and interacting. No two stories are alike. Confusing feelings of embarrassment, shame, joy, love, and hate are woven in a complex nature resulting from

each unique, individual story, which no one can fully understand except the individual who has lived it.

This journey of examining these experiences and then coming to an awareness of their impact is life-long. There is no way to understand the roots of the experience in one day and make changes the next. Each story and each journey is unique. Some learnings are easily incorporated into new behaviors, whereas others are not. These executives have needs, seek affirmation and encouragement, have sorrows and regrets, struggle with ongoing relationships, and have deep pain. However, they often report reservations about revealing them because doing so may give others the impression that they are flawed. One reported continually lying in bed with cold sweats worrying about the next day's events.

Kaiser and Kaplan (2006) referred to these types of awareness as "sensitivities." Kaiser and Kaplan defined these sensitivities as a "set of emotionally charged beliefs and expectations generalized from experience that serve to protect the individual from repeating a painful injury—physical or psychological" (p. 466). These sensitivities "create a vigilant disposition to anxiously expect, selectively perceive, and intensely react to symbolic cues associated with a prior hurt" (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006, p. 466). They usually have roots in painful experiences from the individual's past, which left the individual feeling hurt, inferior, incapable, unworthy, or rejected. This study confirmed the existence off all of the sensitivities referred to by Kaiser and Kaplan: (a) sensitivity to not being perceived as intelligent, (b) sensitivity to being perceived as weak, (c)

sensitivity to disapproval, (d) sensitivity to dependence on others, and (e) sensitivity to authority.

According to Taylor (1998), Mezirow avoided the deep analytical challenges associated with personal transformation, such as its emotive nature, the emphasis on personal self-awareness, and the need to resolve past life issues. As a researcher involved in the study of transformative learning theory, this would be an area for significant change to Mezirow's theory. Although all learning does not involve this level of depth, this study shows that these embedded beliefs and self-perceptions are not easily changed and are accompanied by confusing feelings and emotions. This study confirmed the depth of the journey.

According to Mezirow (1981), there are two paths to perspective transformation. The first is sudden insight into an assumption that has limited or distorted one's understanding of oneself and one's relationships. The second is similar but is through a series of transitions that allow an individual to revise specific assumptions about one's self until the structure of assumptions has been transformed. The second path is more common. Mezirow (1994) described

> two different paths toward transformation, one cumulative, a set of progressive transformations related to meaning schemes, and the other epochal, a sudden reversal in figure and ground, a profound insight into the premises or presuppositions which have distorted or limited our understanding, often triggered by a disorienting dilemma, and involving a broader view of the origin, nature, and consequences of assumptions. (pp. 229–230)

In this study perspective transformation came in both forms, but the process of incorporating the learning into a new mindset and into new behaviors was gradual. This study confirmed Mezirow's (1994) finding: "Development progress occurs through

shifts—transformations in both meaning schemes and meaning perspectives—toward the acquisition of meaning perspectives and schemes which are more inclusive, differentiating, permeable and integrative of experience" (p. 228). Taylor (as cited in Mezirow, 2000) reported prior studies of perspective transformation finding the process does not necessarily follow the 10 steps Mezirow proposed in a sequential order. In this study the participants seemed to move to a later stage before progressing through an earlier one at times.

Taylor (as cited in Mezirow, 2000) commented that "the journey of transformation is more individualistic, fluid and recursive than originally thought" and that "certain phases seem to be more significant to change than others" (p. 292). It is clear from this study that with deeply held mental models, an expectation of an overnight change is unrealistic. Armed with an awareness, the difficult work can begin. Taylor (as cited in Mezirow, 2000) also indicated that there is little understanding as to why some disorienting dilemmas lead to perspective transformations and others do not. In this study two of the participants heard the feedback, contemplated making changes, and decided that change was not necessary. Gavin was told that others were unable to see when he was overstressed at work and so were not able to help him. Related this to his days on the sports field, he said there was no benefit to revealing a high level of stress. He would simply funnel that stress back into efforts.

Neuman (1996) found that learners' willingness to explore their feelings resulted in an increased self-awareness and ultimately changes in meaning structures. "When current affect was incorporated into reflective processing it often produced clues and

insights for directing reflections focus toward the more fundamental or assumptive basis underlying meaning structures and perspectives" (Neuman, 1996, p. 462). Through this executive-feedback process these individuals saw more clearly certain aspects of themselves and were able to reflect more deeply, even though for several the issues raised were not ones they had not reflected upon in the past. Kaiser and Kaplan (2006) pointed out that this type of revelation is not necessarily new for many and that it has often been heard before by the executive; what is most helpful is that the individual now has a more complex understanding of the counterproductive behavior and needs a number of strategies for change.

Transformative learning theory indicates four ways to learn: (a) refining or elaborating meaning schemes, (b) learning new meaning schemes, (c) transforming meaning schemes, and (d) transforming meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). "We transform frames of reference by becoming critically reflective of their assumptions and aware of the context—the source, nature, and consequences of our taken for granted beliefs" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Each of these participants examined meaning schemes and perspectives and, for the most part, refined or elaborated his or her meaning schemes. In some instances, they also revised their meaning perspectives. "Action in transformation theory means making a decision, not necessarily an immediate behavior change" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225) "or reasoned reaffirmation of an existing pattern of action" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 224). For many in this study an observable behavioral change was not yet made, but internally a decision had been made to live differently or to live with a sense of awareness.

Conclusion 5: The transformative self-learning experience leads to a more authentic presentation of self to their peers, subordinates, and superiors, and those further along the journey have realized an important paradox. For the participants in this study the experience of the executive-feedback session and the learning experience resulted in a more authentic presentation of self to others. Although this finding is along a continuum with some taking specific action to present themselves in a new and different way and others simply having an awareness in their mind of a deep meaning scheme that they were attempting to change, all indicated that they were making attempts to present themselves in a way that was more authentic.

At the left end of the continuum are those still struggling to understand the source and nature of the root causes of their meaning schemes and resulting behaviors. Keith, whose passive aggressive behavior was identified and discussed in the feedback session, was stuck trying to remember and understand the reasons behind the behavior. His resulting awareness hardly impacted the way that he presented himself to others, although he was taking some initial steps at home with his wife. On the right end of the continuum, older individuals with deep trauma from childhood who have spent years in counseling have discovered a paradox in terms of disclosure (discussed below) and the presentation of self to others. Those in the middle of the continuum are testing the waters with new behaviors and experimenting with letting others understand more about their life story.

The developing executives in the middle and to the left of the continuum have a strong need to hide themselves from others. Those at the right end of the continuum have discovered the paradox of presenting their authentic selves to others. Henry said it best:

"The point of life is not hiding." Ethan said, "I have no embarrassment as far as keeping secrets, because if people really knew this about me, I don't think they would think less of me." These two individuals are lessening their perceived need to hide their authentic selves from others. Both have been through deeply painful childhood experiences and years of counseling. Ethan made the point that these "evolutionary changes" over many years of self-examination and understanding were the result not just of the executive-feedback session changing how he sees himself, but also of years of counseling. Sharing their story with others (peers, subordinates, and superiors) can provide a significant amount of strength and connection to others. Their need to hide is going away, and paradoxically the disclosure and presentation of a more authentic self are strengthening their relationship with others.

These developing executives share a common fear of being found out; they fear that if others understood their experiences, their positions would be in jeopardy. A few are coming to see that the opposite may be true. Once armed with an awareness of their story and its impact on their lives, participants gained power from sharing that story with others. Often, in sharing, they found that others experienced similar struggles or shared similar fears and anxieties.

In Taylor's (1998) review of Mezirow's transformative learning theory he concluded that Mezirow's theory is between two models of change, one related to coming to terms with one's self and the other emphasizing coming to terms with self in relationship to society. These executives are located along a continuum of growth, with

some fully ready to present most of themselves to the surrounding world and others remaining in hiding.

Conclusion 6: Transformative self-learning experiences at the executive level are important for the effectiveness of the organization. Greater self-awareness and self-acceptance lead to stronger self-efficacy and more effective communication and organizational relationships. The result of this transformative experience is a function of the level of self-understanding and resulting acceptance and translation into behavior, of improving communication within organizational divisions. Beth said,

> I would push people way too hard and sometimes I would just go completely around them if I felt like they were a hindrance to getting something done. . . . I have gone back now and shared some information with my direct reports so that they can understand who I am and understand why I act the way that I do and what's made me who I am today, so I feel like it has given them a better perspective.

Gavin said,

> There have been a lot of mistakes that I have made over the years. Probably the biggest thing is treating people the same rather than recognizing that people are different and like to be treated in different ways and managed in different ways.

This process has also helped the relationship with the supervisor as they come to see and understand more about the underpinnings of the employee.

Each executive is on an individual journey based on their level of influence in the organization. "After all, everybody accepts, at least on a rational level, that leading others involves understanding oneself and the way we present ourselves in interactions with others" (Kets De Vries & Korotov, 2007, p. 381). Henry said,

> Wow, I am really influencing some people one way or another, so if I don't get serious about some of these gaps in my life, what I don't realize is that it is not just me, it is my influence on other people which is a big deal.

For many organizations the challenge is determining whether or not development activities improve the efficiency or profitability of the firm. Pinpointing the organizational benefit is difficult for many development programs, as with the executive-feedback session. Although the purpose of this study was not to identify an organizational improvement linked to the development experience, several participants reported improved communication with superiors, peers, and subordinates. Rather than stifling diverse and creative approaches, they were opening their minds to new and different approaches, were more purposeful with listening to others and aware of their potential to direct conversations, and were more comfortable revealing themselves to others. These changes and their impact on the effectiveness of their departments and in turn the entire organization are perhaps the focus for another study. However, most of the participants reported positive changes that ultimately have an impact on the organization as a whole.

Conclusion 7: An idealized model of intrapersonal-skill development for executives. The results of the study allowed for the development of a model executive-leadership, intrapersonal-skill development process, which uses concepts from Mezirow's (1981, 1991) theory of transformative learning, Hogan and Warrenfelz (2003), Kaiser and Kaplan (2006), Day (2000), and Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007). This idealized model is related to development experiences involving deep perspective transformation, such as the executive-feedback experience of this study. This research revealed, although not necessarily new, several critical components to this process, including confidentiality and trust, the existence of a learning culture, a strong supervisory relationship that includes reciprocal vulnerability and a willingness to disclose, other developmental programs

giving the participants an opportunity to try new behaviors and develop awareness of existing mental models, a trusted and skilled facilitator, and a systematic method of follow-up developmental support such as coaching. See Figure 4.

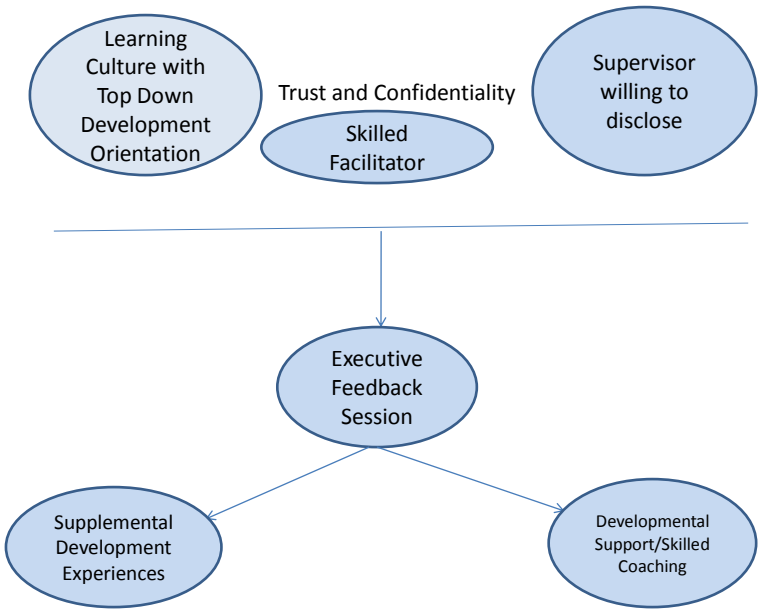

Figure 4. Hamilton idealized model of executive intrapersonal-skill development.

Contributions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to learn about the lived experiences of developing executives as they progressed through an executive-feedback session designed to help them better understand their early-childhood and young-adult experiences and to connect those experiences to the leadership roles within the organization. This section discusses the contributions made to theory and research on executive development, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Contributions to theory. This study makes contributions to the field. Specifically, findings demonstrate the importance of (a) a learning culture, (b) a model of executive development to match recent theories, (c) insight into the deeper struggle of the developing executive, and (d) attention to the deep emotive process.

1. Importance of a learning culture. Taylor (2007, 2009) raised the issue of context in fostering transformative learning. This study revealed the importance of a supportive and learning-oriented culture in which to foster the transformative learning experience. This study contributed to a better understanding of transformative learning theory and, placed in the context of this privately held organization, examined the transformative learning process in a context that had received little attention. Further, the study contributed to an understanding of the practical importance of culture when undertaking executive development experiences of this nature. McCauley (as cited in Zaccaro & Klominski, 2001) indicated large gaps in research on understanding the organizational context that best fosters executive development. Although centered on one type of developmental experience for executives, the study contributes to an understanding of the organizational factors important to fostering this development.

2. The importance of the development of a model of executive development to match recent theories. "While current leadership theories have grown in sophistication and breadth, they have not translated into a comparable range of effective practices" (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003, p. 770). Hoojberg and Quinn (1992) introduced the concept that effective leaders need significant behavioral complexity. They viewed behavioral complexity as one's ability to respond to the complex organizational environment with

varied responses to fit the situation. Marion and Uhl Bien (2001) introduced the term *complex leadership* and emphasized that leaders need to "understand patterns of complexity and learn to manipulate the situations of complexity more than its results" (p. 403). "Complex adaptive systems are composed of a diversity of agents that interact with each other, mutually affect each other, and in so doing generate novel behavior for the system as a whole" (Regine & Lewin, 2000, p. 6). Leaders in a complex system "need to leave the system alone to generate positive emergence, yet still provide general control to keep the system generally focused to maintain—and further enable—its complex structure" (Marion & Uhl Bien, 2001, p. 403).

To succeed, a leader needs to understand how to catalyze (as opposed to create) the organizational environments. According to Regine and Lewin (2000), leaders need to foster open communication, unleash human potential, embrace change, work with people where they are, see the organization in its wholeness, create chaos in varying degrees by disrupting existing patterns, attend to nonlinear relationships, see people with greater depth, and place a value on authenticity. They stressed that leaders should not feel pressured to have all of the answers but give up the illusion of control and embrace the paradoxical nature of their position. The particular leadership development process in this study ultimately develops in some the type of skills mentioned by these theorists, including self-understanding, being comfortable presenting an authentic person to the environment, and understanding how one impacts situations.

3. This study is a unique, in-depth, phenomenological study allowing insight into the deeper struggle of the developing executive. This study has contributed to the

understanding of the executive journey. As indicated above, there is a significant difference between leadership development and leader development. This study contributes to the theory of executive development by Day (2000) and others by detailing how the structure of the development process can be enriched and designed to achieve the desired outcome.

4. Without attention to the deep emotive process, the intent of the development experience becomes lost. According to Taylor (1998), Mezirow avoided or gave "minimal attention to the deep analytical challenges associated with personal transformation such as its emotive nature, the emphasis on personal self awareness, and the need to resolve past life issues" (p. 19). This study demonstrates that those who facilitate this type of development experience often underestimate its impact. According to Mezirow (1981), "The traumatic severity of the disorienting dilemma is clearly a factor in establishing the probability of transformation" (p. 7). In this case the disorienting dilemma was the executive-feedback experience that led each participant on a journey of transformation. Without attention to this deep, emotive process, the intent of the development experience becomes lost.

Hackman and Wageman (2007) indicated that rather than asking what should be taught in leadership courses, we should be asking, "How can we help leaders to learn?" (p. 46). Hogan and Warrenfelz (2003) noted that the most difficult skills for a leader to learn are intrapersonal skills, and Kaiser and Kaplan (2006) observed that the most difficult thing for an executive to learn about is himself or herself. These suggest the contribution of this study.

"The most significant learning involves critical premise reflection of premise about oneself" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 224). This study provides an avenue for an organization to address the deep development process that encompasses executive development as it relates to self-learning and the related development process. This development process comes with a significant set of challenges, given the sensitivity of the material and the deeply held mental models that these executives bring to the organization. Many organizations likely will not take the steps required to systematically develop executives in this fashion, and obviously this is just one path of development for executives. For instance, other necessary components of development for executives include strategic training and industry-specific training. Within the organization used in this study, another entire training and development division is devoted to various other areas.

Recommendations for practice. The field of executive development is comparable to the field of education, given its complexity. Organizations, just as schools, strive for continual improvement. Through this research study one can see the limitation of certain types of development experiences being carried out solely in the classroom. These particular development activities and the reflection upon the participants' experiences call for a different setting than the classroom. Below, this researcher has identified several recommendations resulting from this study for those involved in executive development. According to Zaccaro and Horn (2003), leadership theory has not led to clear, distinct, and practical ways to develop executives.

1. Organizations committed to deep executive development must provide a support structure. The organization in this study is to be commended for making executive development a priority and seeing its importance to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. However, the gaping hole in this process was clearly a lack of ongoing support provided to the developing executives who participated in this study. Most in the study articulated a deep internal struggle with what had been learned in the session and its incorporation into their belief system and daily behaviors. Several indicated a desire for some type of ongoing coaching to equip them with the tools to make necessary changes. Even in the absence of an ongoing coaching program, it may be possible to help the participants develop the necessary skills to improve their ability to reflect on these experiences and learn to be more self aware and adjust behaviors.

With certain development programs that do not venture so deeply, a set of prescriptives or follow-up reading may be adequate. However, given the depth of learning related to the executive-feedback session, it is unfair to expect these executives to process and continue to develop without some sort of follow-through or ongoing support. This support could come in the form of follow-up meetings with the psychologist, the hiring of an internal or external executive coach, or further training to executives in the company to provide ongoing coaching to their subordinates. The concern here is that having gone very deep psychologically with these individuals, a level of expertise is needed to handle the more sensitive issues. Therefore, a trained professional is critical to this type of executive development experience in organizations.

2. Given the nature of this deep learning experience, organizations should pay particular attention to confidentiality and trust in order to foster the transformative learning experience. This type of executive development experience is serious and deals with sensitive information. Organizations who venture down this path of executive development must be fully prepared to contain the resulting information and findings from the process. Confidentiality and trust are important to the resulting learnings, so to obtain maximum results from the experience, organizations must provide participants a safe environment to allow for disclosure. In this particular study all psychological written testing data never leaves the hand of the psychologist and no written report resulted from the experience. However, the session was audio-taped and the individual given the audiotape at the conclusion of the session. This allowed the individual to be fully present and in the moment, as opposed to having to worry about note taking. Anyone involved in this type of experience must understand the importance of keeping the information in the strictest confidence; otherwise, the experience should not happen because of the potential damage. The presence of the supervisor in the second part of the feedback sessions gave several of the participants in the study some concern about what would be done with the information learned about the participant. Although in most cases in this study within this organization a great degree of trust seemed to exist between the employee and the supervisor, organizations will need to really examine the benefits versus the risks of having the supervisors present for a part of the discussion. This type of learning regarding the deeper aspects of self may be better absorbed, understood, and considered safer in the absence of senior executives.

When one person is the center of the development activity and others are there primarily to observe and contribute to the feedback, the fewer people involved the better. Otherwise individuals may feel as though they have an audience and may be less likely to disclose vulnerabilities.

3. Organizations involved in this type of executive development experience must pay particular attention to the selection of a skilled facilitator. Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007) indicated, "Managing this sort of program demands the type of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are not typically found in a traditional executive educator" (p. 385). The sensitive nature of the information disclosed in these types of experiences is dangerous territory for anyone not professionally trained to effectively handle it. Significant damage can occur to an individual if this information is mishandled. Further, the facilitator needs to understand the nature of organizational behavior and executive leadership roles to facilitate and nurture the learning experience. In this particular case both individuals who facilitated these sessions were licensed and trained clinical psychologists with over 20 years of experience in private practice as well as years of experience consulting within corporate settings.

4. Organizations involved in this type of executive development experience must give serious consideration to the ethical issues created by this type of experience. The decision of an organization to engage in the executive feedback session gives rise to several ethical considerations. The line may become blurred in these sessions as to the distinction between self evaluation and performance evaluation, especially as it relates to the entrance of the supervisor into the room following the participant's initial time with

the psychologist. Whereas in a 360 degree feedback process the discussion may center more on performance and impact on others, this process delves deeply into an individual's self concept and psychological make-up. This can be dangerous territory for organizations and is likely the reason that many firms outsource this type of development rather than completing it in house. Organizations should give serious consideration to the impact of the presence of the supervisor and the nature of the disclosure taking place so as to avoid psychological damage to the individual. Further, if organizations provide follow up coaching to assist these developing executives with learning and behavioral change, these coaches will need to recognize the boundaries of the expertise and be careful not to cross the lines beyond their true capabilities.

Recommendations for research. Hackman and Wagemen (2007) suggested that rather than asking the question, "What should be taught in leadership courses?" we should be asking, "How can leaders be helped to learn?" (p. 46). The number of research studies focused on how executives learn is limited, so any future research study covering this area could contribute significantly to the literature. Further understanding the nature of the learning process of executives will reveal its complex nature as well as the complex nature of the position. Listed below are several recommendations for future research within the executive development arena.

1. Research in the field of executive development could investigate the impact of time on the nature of learning, especially as it relates to this type of deep learning experiences. The participants in this study had completed this executive-feedback experience within the 9 months. For several this experience, the related feedback, and the

ongoing struggle were fresh in their minds, perhaps even too fresh to have had time to process what they had experienced. Those who had gone through the session several months before the interview had more time to process the experience and then to begin adjusting their mindset and even their behavior. A possible study would be to revisit individuals after a longer time period has elapsed since a development experience to determine the impact of time on the learnings and resulting behaviors.

Given the nature of this type of experience, this journey is a long-term one that forces the individuals to examine deeply held models and beliefs. This examination and reformulation takes time and the trying of new behaviors. Therefore, a possible study would be to investigate the outcomes 2–4 years following a development experience of this type.

2. Research centered on these types of development experiences could examine the nature of the age and maturity of the participants as it relates to the experience. Avolio (2010) stressed the importance of better understanding the "development readiness of participants" (p. 752) so that each can be met at their individual starting point.

Participants in this particular study ranged from 27–46 years old, which means that their respective life experiences varied greatly. All were married and some had children. It was difficult to draw any type of conclusion related to the participants' age and their learning experience. Level of maturity through life experiences seemed to be the most important factor. Paradoxically, some younger individuals seemed to have more wisdom and self-knowledge due to childhood trauma than older participants who had not experienced such significant issues. A future study could examine more closely age-

related factors and the transformative learning experience. Taylor (2009) raised the issue of readiness of individuals for transformative learning: "Of significance seems to be the degree of life experience when fostering transformative learning" (p. 6). According to Mezirow (2000), "Effective participation in discourse and in transformative learning requires emotional maturity—awareness, empathy, control—what Goleman (1998) calls 'emotional intelligence'—knowing and managing one's emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, handling relationships—as well as clear thinking" (p. 11). A future study could draw conclusions regarding readiness for this type of experience as it relates to one's life experiences and make recommendations as to whether or not these types of programs are more effective if experienced earlier in an executive's career.

3. As scientists come to understand more about the functioning of the brain and human relationships, research could grow in the direction of the biology of learning and leading. Technology is helping us to better understand the nature of the way the body and mind function. Researchers are just beginning to understand the workings of the brains of leaders and how they function, as compared to followers' brains. Zull (2002) stated, "The most important factor in learning is the existing networks of neurons in the learner's brain" (p. 93); further, "for our knowledge to grow, the neuronal network must physically change" (p. 112). Cozoline (2006) described parents as the primary environment in which young brains develop, and these early experiences have a "disproportionate impact on the development of neural systems" (p. 7). The messages children receive from their earliest caregivers have a significant impact on their mental models and behaviors. "Though experience shapes the activity of the brain and the

strength of the neuronal connections throughout life, experience early in life may be especially crucial in organizing the way the basic structures of the brain develop" (Siegel, 1999, p. 13). Several of the participants in this study intuitively made comments such as, "This stuff is just sort of ingrained" or, "This stuff is just sort of mapped." Recently the term *neuroleadership* was introduced by Rock and Schwartz (2006), referring to an emerging field of study focused on bringing neuroscientific knowledge into areas such as leadership development, management training, coaching, change management, and consulting. The biology of leadership will be an exciting and revealing area of research over the next 20 years with significant implications for the executive development process.

4. Future quantitative research related to the findings of this study. Chatman and Kennedy (2010) stated, "Leadership is not amenable to easy formulas and is likely to continue to stimulate confusion, stereotypic behavior, and possibly imitation of behavior in the wrong context or of behavior uncorrelated with any real measure of performance" (p. 174). This study was qualitative in nature and therefore sought to gain an in-depth understanding of an aspect of human nature. Quantitative studies have as their objective to develop a hypotheses relating to a particular phenomenon with the process of measurement serving an important role to ultimately describe relationships and correlations. The findings from this study do provide an opportunity for the development of further quantitative studies related to the executive development process and transformative learning. Survey instruments related to trust (of facilitator or supervisor), confidentiality, the strength of the learning culture, perceived behavioral change (from

self and others), self-esteem, and self-efficacy could be administered prior to the executive feedback and then at various intervals following the executive-feedback process in order to better understand the relationships between these variables and the desired outcomes. The survey instrument could include age and time with the organization. The study could be longitudinal in nature, showing the degree of perceived behavioral change over a longer period of time than was used in this particular study. The study could use a control group of individuals who go through the executive-feedback process but receive no follow-up development experiences or coaching, and then compare that group to a group receiving further development experiences and coaching. Such a study could show the impact of the follow-through missing within this particular organization. The study could involve a survey instrument for peers, subordinates, and supervisors prior to the feedback session and then at various intervals following the session to measure the perceptions of behavioral change of the individual participating in the feedback experience.

5. Given the common theme resulting from the interviews in this study related to a deep desire for acceptance and approval, future research on executive development and even leadership in general could explore the motivations that may propel these individuals to excel. A common theme from this study was the individual participants' development of an awareness of some aspect of their personality and a deep desire for acceptance and approval in some form. Individuals primarily sought acceptance and approval from their parents and generally wanted to know that they were accepted for who they had become. Most seemed to need to prove something to someone, including

themselves, likely resulting from messages they received during their development. Although not directly related to the field of executive development, an exploration of the deeper issues motivating those seeking to climb the professional ladder may lead to additions to an existing, structured development process and may even serve as the core area for exploration as a developing executive begins his or her journey.

Summary

"At its heart, leadership is about human behavior" as "it revolves around the highly complex interplay between leaders and followers, all put into a particular situational context" (Kets de Vries & Engellau, 2010, p. 192). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences and perceived outcomes of developing executives who participated in an executive-feedback process. Using the framework of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1981, 1991), this study sought to understand the individual's experience and the related process of learning and making meaning of the experience. The career path of an executive can lead to a deeply personal experience of self-development because of the influence these executives personally have on the culture, strategy, and operations of organizations. The primary finding of this study was the deep internal struggle that comes with the development of intrapersonal skills for these developing executives. On a deep level, many executives, like everyone, want to be accepted and seek approval. For those organizations willing to support executives along this journey, this study has provided insight into the considerations necessary in order to achieve the desired results.

In their description of transformational executive education programs, Kets De Vries and Korotov (2007) indicated that a transformational program presupposes a change in behavior of the participating executive so that he or she becomes more effective in personal or organizational change. This study has reinforced the importance of these types of programs within organizations and has contributed to the literature related to executive development and transformative learning by providing an in-depth review of one type of executive development experience.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

The George Washington University
WASHINGTON DC

Research Consent Form

Study Title: Developing Executives through the exploration of Personal Histories: A Phenomenological Study of Transformational Learning in the Executive Development Process

GW IRB number: 090711
Principal Investigator: Dr. Michael Marquardt - Telephone number: 703-726-3764
Sub-Investigator: Robert Hamilton - Telephone number: 443-271-7613

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Michael Marquardt of the Department of Human and Organizational Learning, George Washington University (GWU) and Sub-Investigator Robert Hamilton. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. Your employment status will not, in any way, be affected should you choose not to participate or if you decide to withdraw from the study at any time.

You are being asked to take part in this study because you have recently completed an Executive Feedback session with the company and the research study is being undertaken to better understand the experience and learnings of those completing the Executive Feedback sessions. The research will be conducted at . A total of 10 participants will be needed to participate in this study.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a face to face interview with Robert Hamilton (approximately one hour) at your office or a mutually agreeable location. There is no specific preparation required, you are simply asked to give thought to your Executive Feedback Experience and what you learned through the process.

The total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is approximately one hour for the interview and perhaps minimal time for follow up questions if needed (though this is not expected). Your interview will be audio recorded and the audio recording will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

There are no known risks associated with this study. Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential, however, this can not be guaranteed. The data collected from the interview will not be shared with , although general themes and patterns collected from the compilation of interviews will be summarized and provided to the company in a summarized version. In order to protect your privacy you will be assigned a fictitious name for all written reporting done for this study.

It is possible that some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and you may take a break at any time during the study. You may stop your participation in this study at any time,

You will not benefit directly from your participation in the study except for your opportunity to share your experience and what has been learned from the feedback session. The benefits to research and humankind that might result from this study are a better understanding of the way in which executives are developed and a better understanding of how adults learn and perhaps change their behavior.

You do not have to participate in this study if you do not want to. Should you decide to participate and later change your mind, you can withdraw at anytime.
You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

The investigator can decide to withdraw you from the study at any time. You could be taken off the study for reasons related solely to you (for example, not following study-related directions from the Investigator) or because the entire study is stopped.

If results of this research study are reported in journals or at scientific meetings, the people who participated in this study will not be named or identified. GWU will not release any information about your research involvement without your written permission, unless required by law.

Should you have any specific concerns you may contact The Office of Human Research of George Washington University, at telephone number (202) 994-2715. They can provide further information about your rights as a research participant. If you think you have been harmed in this study, please report this to the Principal Investigator of this study (Dr. Michael Marquardt - 703-726-3764). Further information regarding this study may be obtained by contacting Robert Hamilton (the Sub- Investigator for this study) at telephone number (443) 271-7613.
*Please keep a copy of this document in case you want to read it again.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign below:

I understand the information printed on this form. I have considered this study, its risks and potential benefits. My questions so far have been answered. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study and my understanding that I can withdraw at any time.

_____ _____
Subject's Name (printed) and Signature Date

_____ _____
Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

_____ _____
Principal Investigator's Signature Date

DO NOT SIGN AFTER THE EXPIRATION DATE OF: 06/26/2010

George Washington University Research Study

July 1, 2009

Dear John Doe:

Congratulations on your recent completion of the Executive Feedback Experience at
Given that you have gone through this process in the past six months, you are being asked to participate in a research study designed to better understand the learning experiences of developing executives.

As a researcher at the George Washington University I am seeking ten participants who have recently completed the Executive Feedback to take part in this study. Given the limited number of people that are selected to participate in the Executive Feedback experience annually I hope that you will consider participating in this study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and results from this study will not be reported back except in a broad, general themes format. The results from this study will be reported without reference to you. Your responses will be known only to the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone outside the research team.

Although fully approved this study has not been commissioned and is an independent research study being conducted as a part of my doctoral dissertation work at The George Washington University.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a face to face interview with me that will last approximately one hour and the interview will be done at your office or a mutually agreeable location that is convenient for you. There is no specific preparation required, you are simply asked to give thought to your Executive Feedback Experience and what you learned through the process. This interview may provide a benefit to you in that you will be able to further process and discuss the learning that came from the experience.

The total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is approximately one hour for the interview and perhaps minimal time for follow up questions if needed (though this is not expected). Your interview will be audio recorded and the audio recording will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

I hope you will participate in this study, and if for any reason you decide to participate and then decide to withdraw, you are free to do so. I will be contacting you shortly to discuss your potential participation. In the interim if you have questions about this study, please contact me at (443) 271-7613.

Robert (Bob) Hamilton - Researcher
The George Washington University
The Executive Leadership Doctoral Program
44983 Knoll Sq. Ste 391
Ashburn, Va. 20147

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

The purpose in this study of the researcher's interview with each participant was to answer the research questions. Listed below are each of the research questions and the corresponding interview questions used in an effort to answer that research question. First, four background questions were asked:

1. Could you please describe for me your position within the organization and talk about your career path prior to joining this organization and then your career path through this organization?
2. Could you please describe your daily responsibilities?
3. How do you believe you are viewed by your employees as a leader?
4. How would you describe your strengths and weaknesses?

Research Question 1. What is the lived experience of developing executives who progress through a feedback session designed to connect early-childhood and young-adult experiences, beliefs, and marker events to present-day leadership behaviors? This question was answered through Interview Questions 5–9:

5. Tell me about your experience in the session.
6. What did you learn about yourself and your personal life history?
7. What surprised you about what you learned?
8. What did you agree with, what did not agree with? What did you do about what you learned that you did not agree with?
9. What do you consider the most important learnings from this process?

Research Question 2. In what ways do these developing executives experience this process as transformative? Research Question 2 was answered using data from Interview Questions 10–14:

10. How has the experience of the Executive Feedback changed your perspective about your self (how you see yourself)?
11. Have the ideas that you held about yourself and your experiences been changed through this process? Please elaborate.
12. Has this experience resulted in a change or changes in your behavior? Please explain.
13. What feedback did you hear that caused particular changes?
14. What part of the feedback experience was most impactful?

Research Question 3. What has been the impact of this executive feedback experience on them as leaders? Research Question 3 was answered through data from Interview Questions 15–17:

15. As a result of this experience are you leading differently? Please explain.
16. What have been changes in your work behaviors/actions since the experience? What specific steps have you taken to make these changes?
17. What feedback have you received that give you an indication as to how these changes have been viewed by others?

Finally, Interview Question 18 asked participants if there was anything else that they would like to express about this entire process. That concluded each interview.