Walking the Line or Crossing the Cubicle Aisle: An Exploratory Qualitative Study of Career Federal Leader Experiences with Ideological Polarization in the National Capital Region

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Dedication

This dissertation is first and foremost dedicated to my mother. Thank you for establishing my traits of curiosity and lifelong learning. Second, to my family; I could not do anything without your love and unwavering support. To my big sisters, thank you for protecting me and making me the person I am today. To my wife, my love, thank you for being so incredibly supportive of my decision to take on more learning (and stress!). To my boys and girls, thank you for your patience and for the unexpected moments of joy (and distraction) that kept me grounded. Thanks for being great kids. I love you.

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Abstract of Dissertation

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Since the 2025 inauguration, the actions of the second Trump administration have generated significant controversy, reflecting deep national divisions over institutional dismantling, foreign policy, and unorthodox leadership appointments. This polarizing policy agenda directly challenges career federal servants, who are tasked with nonpartisan implementation of priorities that may conflict with their professional roles, exemplified by events like the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) mass firings. These chasms are a continuation of recent upheaval, intensified by COVID-19's isolation and social movements like Black Lives Matter and the January 6th Capitol breach, placing National Capital Region (NCR) career federal leaders at the epicenter of ideological conflict and policy whipsaw across the Trump-Biden-Trump administrations.

Given the scarcity of research on their experiences amid escalating polarization, this study explored how NCR career federal leaders experienced ideological polarization and exercised leadership in this context. Interviews revealed that these leaders possess a nuanced and multilayered understanding of polarization, encompassing agency-level beliefs, program focus, power dynamics, and interpersonal dynamics, extending beyond mere political science concepts. Furthermore, participants described their leadership as relational, dialogical, and rooted in integrity, aligning with established relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). These findings offer a novel, unified understanding of the intertwined nature of polarization and relational leadership in the federal workplace, suggesting that leadership is constructed relationally to achieve continuity amidst ideological conflict.

Preface

From my home in Maryland, just a short distance from the U.S. Capitol Building, I watched over ten thousand people swarm the Capitol on January 6th, 2021. While some breached the building, all appeared intensely interested in the events unfolding inside, and some successfully halted congressional action. I was home, having just finished a night shift in the Pentagon's National Military Command Center, a nerve center for the Defense Department. Though my duty as a military member meant staying out of domestic matters, I felt a profound sense of unease witnessing the breach of the nation's most sacred place. Days prior, a colleague and I, separated by a spacious aisle in our cubicles, had discussed the outcome of the U.S. presidential election; from that conversation, it was clear our understandings of the result and associated reality differed greatly. This same disparity in perceived reality was echoed by those attempting to 'stop the steal' on January 6th.

Apparently, I was not alone in my concern regarding the polarized, constructed realities of the incumbent president's supporters. Just days later, on January 12th, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark A. Milley, distributed a memo confirming the election's outcome and explicitly acknowledging the polarizing views surrounding it. The memo was short and direct, denouncing the January 6th events and clearly stating the future: "President-elect Biden will be inaugurated and will become our 46th Commander and Chief" (Milley, 2021). This document, signed by all senior military officers, was a clear attempt to establish a shared reality.

The polarizing views of the November 2020 election followed a summer marked by the politicization of other major national events, leading to visible protests in the National Capital Region (NCR). From my Pentagon vantage point, the demonstrations over the viral video of police brutality distilled into the fundamental question of whose lives mattered, Black or Blue,

where colleagues often offered ‘all lives matter’ in response to lamenting police brutality. Regardless, the Black Lives Matter protests arrived in D.C. in force, culminating in President Trump’s widely publicized photo opportunity at St. John’s Episcopal Church across from Lafayette Square.

The pervasive nature of politics in the NCR makes its influence unavoidable for nonpolitical, career federal employees who must constantly navigate the external projection of multiple realities and ideologies, often displayed through protest signs. This polarizing sentiment intensified sharply between the spring of 2020 and the fall of 2021. A series of major events, including protests over the federal COVID-19 response, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the events of January 6th, created a deeply polarized external climate. This atmosphere, compounded by inherent ideological differences within the workplace, sharply highlights the complex context that nonpolitical, career federal leaders in the NCR must navigate daily.

Crucially, existing federal leadership development programs are largely voluntary and do not explicitly address the emergent challenges of polarization. Therefore, researching how career federal leaders experience and lead in this context will provide essential practical knowledge, extend existing academic research, and identify avenues for future scholarly inquiry. Accordingly, the study that follows illustrates how these leaders experienced both polarization and leadership within this new era. This research culminates in the construction of the Leader Development Tool: Multidirectional Relational Leadership, which operationalizes the required relational competencies for navigating this challenging environment.

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Table 1

Glossary of Terms

Key Term	Definition	Defined by
Ideological Polarization	The divergence of socially constructed realities and attitudes on substantive issues	Grim et al., 2019
Social Identity Theory	A framework of ingroup-outgroup, which explains the desire to move between and the clash between groups	Tajfel, 1974
Federal Employee	Federal employee means a current employee of an agency, including a current member of the Armed Forces or a Reserve of the Armed Forces (Reserves), employees of the United States Postal Service, and seasonal and temporary employees.	41 CFR § 105-56.015
General Schedule	The general schedule is a promotion and titling scale, which ranges from GS-00 to GS-15.	gsa.gov
Senior Executive Service	Members of the SES serve in the key positions just below the top presidential appointees. SES members are the major link between these appointees and the rest of the Federal workforce.	opm.gov
National Capital Region	District of Columbia; Montgomery and Prince George's Counties of Maryland; Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William Counties of Virginia	40 U.S.C. § 71
Office of Personnel Management	An organization responsible for managing the civil service of the federal government	www.usa.gov/agencies/office-of-personnel-management

Chapter 1: Introduction

This exploratory qualitative study investigates the experiences of career federal leaders with ideological polarization in the National Capital Region (NCR). Specifically, it examines how career federal leaders experience ideological polarization in their roles and their understanding of how leadership works in the same context. In the current era of pronounced societal and political divisions, understanding the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of career federal leaders across diverse agencies is crucial for ensuring effective governance. This introductory chapter details the research problem, guiding questions, and theoretical framework that inform this inquiry. It also provides a summary of the methodological approach employed and concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and delimitations.

The United States is deeply divided along ideologically polarized lines, a trend going back decades. Fukuyama (2020) argued that the past three decades have witnessed a significant left-right divide and fragmentation, an insight gained from analyzing metadata in the *Journal of Democracy* since 1990. More recently, the advent of technology and societal cleavages have accelerated the formation of homogeneous voter social networks, as indicated by composite national election data from 2000 and original data from 2016 (Butters, 2022). This homogeneity in voting patterns suggests the establishment of defined ingroups, social network homophily, and the perpetuation of ideological polarization, a phenomenon particularly evident since the 2024 election.

Adding a historical lens, Heather Cox Richardson has extensively documented the ideological division in American politics and its intricate relationship with government. Richardson argued that government is both the target and the focal point of an ongoing ideological struggle, a pattern evident in her daily analyses of how institutions are systematically

undermined for partisan gain. Her writing in "Letters from an America" often details instances of judicial appointments, legislative maneuvers, and electoral speculation that illustrate this trend. In *Democracy Awakening*, Richardson (2023) further argues that polarization represents the culmination of a protracted effort to redefine government's role, specifically to curtail its oversight and regulatory powers. She highlights the deliberate erosion of public trust in governmental systems through misinformation and the creation of false realities as a key tactic in this strategy (Richardson, 2023). Through this lens, Richardson suggests that polarization transcends mere political disagreement, becoming an "ideological battle" for the fundamental principles of American governance (p.?).

Polarization has permeated many workplaces, including the federal government, as evidenced by the actions of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and corroborated by various trade journals. However, the problem isn't new. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the politics surrounding mask-wearing influenced intergroup conflict. Woods et al. (2023) found a high correlation between virus mitigation efforts and political affiliation, noting that those intending to vote conservative in the U.S. election were less likely to support mitigation strategies aimed at worker well-being. Trade journals, such as the *Harvard Business Review* and the *Society for Human Resource Management*, further corroborate the link between workplace polarization and conflict. According to HBR, a survey of 486 employees across the United States characterized ideological disagreements as both frequent and detrimental (Minson & Gino, 2022). The survey also indicated that 89 percent of respondents reported experiencing some form of ideological conflict in the workplace. And according to SHRM, 44 percent of HR professionals reported political volatility increased in 2020.

Leaders across both private and public sectors face significant challenges from polarization-induced conflict. Javidan et al. (2023) observed that ideological differences can lead to dysfunctional teams, hindering productivity and collaboration. This challenge is particularly pronounced in the NCR due to unique leadership experiences within federal departments and agencies (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The drama of these ideological clashes plays out daily across all major U.S. news entities. Externally, the NCR has become a focal point for ideological clashes, evidenced by the increasing number of protests aimed at influencing policymakers in recent years. Internally, within agency workspaces, ideological pressure has manifested through executive orders (e.g., Schedule F) targeting perceived unproductive career federal employees and/or explicit political coercion in some agencies, as suggested in a 2022 Federal Employment Viewpoint Survey. Consequently, career federal leaders in the NCR find themselves navigating a challenging context of ideological polarization, both within and outside their workplaces (Baugus & Diemer, 2016).

Research on leadership in the federal government is limited (Lewis, 2019) and lacks an examination of career federal leaders' experiences with polarization. As will be illustrated in Chapter Two, existing literature often addresses polarization at a macro level without delving into the nuanced experiences of these leaders. For instance, McCarty's (2019) research provided an aggregate view of the U.S. government, finding that polarization increases differences in preferences between political appointees and career civil servants. This division has the potential to undermine political control over departments and agencies. Moreover, McCarty found significant ideological differences across all departments and agencies even within the same administration, meaning political appointees themselves are liable to diverge due to polarized viewpoints on policy approaches.

Resh's (2015) findings on the growing polarization within the civil service and the resulting reciprocal distrust between careerists and appointees explicitly centered on the experiences of career federal leaders. Their operational context is significantly influenced by the perception that political appointees may view them with suspicion, potentially hindering their ability to contribute their expertise effectively. Conversely, the documented fear among political appointees of "going native" (Aberbach & Peterson, 2000, p.?) further emphasizes the ongoing awareness and study of the influence and perspectives of career federal leaders within the executive branch.

Similarly, Funderburke (2019) used an analytical regression time series model and qualitative analysis to understand the growing ideological divide on national security legislation concerning the decision to use force over time. That study concluded that the increase in polarization between the two major parties puts the collective national security of the U.S. at risk through the policy-making process. Despite these efforts, research on the specific experiences and responses of career federal leaders to polarization remains largely absent. Understanding how these leaders navigate and mitigate the challenges posed by ideological divisions is essential for maintaining an effective and efficient government.

Statement of the Problem

This study investigates the challenge of increasing ideological polarization in the NCR and the associated gap in research examining how career federal leaders experience and respond. Ideological polarization is defined as the divergence of socially constructed realities and attitudes on substantive issues (Grim et al., 2019). Within organizational settings, Minson and Gino (2022) highlight the difficulties leaders encounter when navigating employee discourse on

sensitive societal issues, personal identity, and political viewpoints, noting that such discussions can become destructive and engender conflict. Ironically, leaders often adopt polarized approaches to workplace conflict arising from these issues, with some actively engaging in such discussions and others avoiding topics related to social movements like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and environmentalism (Minson & Gino, 2022).

While constructive dialogue necessitates a nuanced understanding of conflict and its potential for positive outcomes, many organizations lack the structures and support to foster such understanding, leaving leaders to navigate these complexities to maintain team cohesion and achieve workgroup objectives. This challenge is particularly salient within the federal government, an institution that serves as a symbol of legitimacy and trust for a diverse citizenry in an already politically divided society. Therefore, further research is crucial to establish a foundation for comprehending and effectively responding to the complexities of ideological polarization in the federal workplace, a need that will likely intensify during periods of heightened political activity, such as U.S. presidential elections and public demonstrations in the NCR.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of career federal leaders with ideological polarization in the NCR. Given the vast nature of the U.S. federal government, the study focused on career federal leaders at executive branch agencies. Through the engagement of participant career federal leaders, this study addressed the following primary and secondary questions:

- How do career federal leaders describe ideological polarization?
- What are the leadership experiences of career federal leaders in the context of ideological

polarization?

The original secondary research question—What leadership practices do they describe as the encounter or experience of ideological polarization?—was amended in light of the emergent findings regarding the experience of leadership itself. This adjustment highlights a critical aspect of qualitative research. While careful design is essential, flexibility is equally important, as research questions often evolve during data collection (Elliott et al., 2023).

Statement of Potential Significance

Adu and Miles (2023) argue a compelling statement of significance provides a plausible rationale for a study's importance by addressing three key questions: why the research matters, how it contributes to the body of knowledge, and how it informs practice. They further categorize study significance into theoretical, practical, and research contributions.

To that end, this study is significant in three primary ways: 1. Theoretical Significance: It offers an innovative relational leadership model to understand leader experiences in ideologically polarized contexts; 2. Practical Significance: It provides practical, experience-based suggestions for navigating the contested space of ideological polarization; 3. Research Significance: It introduces a new inquiry into the career federal leader experience of ideological polarization within the NCR, extending current research on relational leadership. Each point of significance is elaborated below.

Theoretical Significance

This study introduces an innovative relational leadership model for understanding leader experiences. Through a novel conceptual framework, it uniquely combines two distinct yet complementary perspectives. Drawing on Uhl-Bien's (2006) view of relational leadership as an overarching framework for integrating various approaches to leadership as a social influence

process, this model separates entity and relational perspectives to bridge differing ontological and epistemological assumptions. The framework then leverages Uhl-Bien's work to integrate Cunliffe and Eriksen's (2011) conceptualization of relational leadership as embedded in leaders' everyday dialogical practices and their moral and ethical dimensions. This integration brings forth the philosophical insights of Bakhtin (1996 [1986], 2002 [1981]) and Ricoeur (1992), allowing the framework to explicitly consider dialogue, intersubjectivity, and integrity. This unique conceptual framework offers a more nuanced understanding of the multilayered environment of ideological polarization that career federal leaders encounter in their roles.

Practical Significance

This study is significant for offering practical, experience-based suggestions for navigating the contested space of ideological polarization. Participants largely described leadership through dialogical methods, which Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) call "relationally responsive practices" (p. 1425). Career federal leaders' experiences with leadership in ideologically polarized contexts align with key relational leadership practices: creating open dialogue, accepting responsibility for recognizing differences, fostering "sensing moments," understanding relational integrity, and becoming more attuned to sensing and responding in the present moment (p.?). These suggestions emphasize leadership as an everyday, relational process based on conversation. This is crucial for engaging and co-constructing reality amidst divergent ideas and realities. Moreover, these insights move beyond traditional skills and behavior-based studies, offering both new ways to conceptualize the leadership challenge and concrete ways to behave in the context of ideological polarization.

Research Significance

Unlike much of the previous empirical research, such as that by McCarty (2019) and Funderburke (2019), which typically concentrated on polarization within specific agencies or the legislative branch, this study stands out by including participants from multiple federal agencies during a period of intense polarization. This comprehensive approach allows for a more robust and generalizable understanding of the experience and impact of ideological polarization across the entire federal landscape.

The study's methodological approach further enhances its value. Instead of merely presenting findings as isolated themes, it employs thematic analysis to uncover rich and nuanced patterns in participants' experiences. These patterns are then vividly illustrated through the innovative use of a composite narrative. This narrative acts as a powerful analytical tool, skillfully weaving together individual voices to create a cohesive yet multifaceted representation of shared experiences. This not only makes the findings more accessible and profound but also offers a compelling and holistic view of the complexities faced by career federal leaders. This method moves beyond simple description, providing a more immersive and integrated understanding of leadership in a polarized environment.

Furthermore, the application of relational leadership theory (RLT) provides a unique lens through which to examine how leadership emerges and is practiced within federal leadership roles in the NCR. This research challenges traditional, hierarchical views of leadership, which is particularly relevant given the distinct challenges faced by career federal leaders. They are often required to lead across different agencies without direct statutory authority and with limited power to enforce compliance. By combining a novel context, a pertinent theoretical framework,

and an innovative analytical method, this study delivers crucial insights for both academic scholarship and practical application in federal administration.

Conceptual Framework

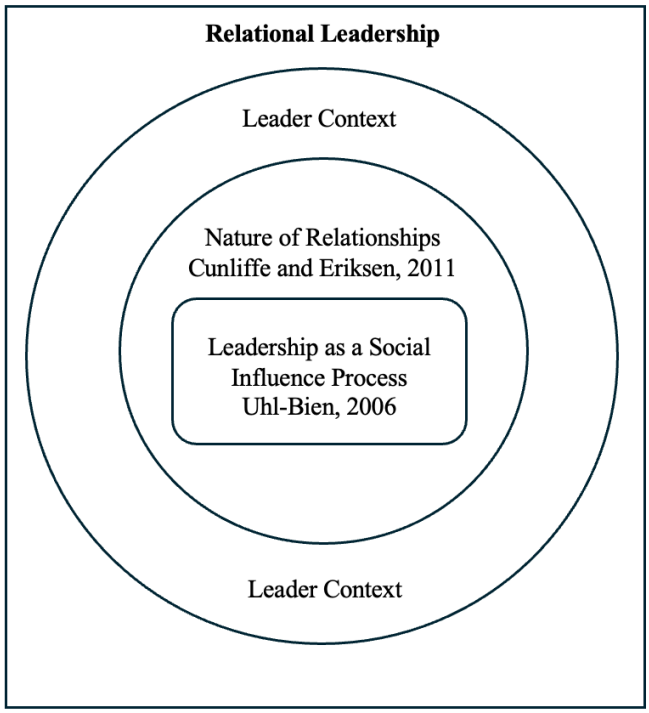
RLT provides an ideal conceptual framework for examining career federal leaders' experiences with polarization in the NCR. Its emphasis on shared meaning and the co-construction of reality is particularly relevant in a context marked by opposing ideas and worldviews. While relational leadership is a relatively recent term (Bower et al., 2000; Drath, 2001; Murrell, 1997; Uhl-Bien, 2003, 2005, 2006), building upon earlier research on relationship-oriented behavior (Stogdill & Coons, 1957), the foundational work of Uhl-Bien, Cunliffe, and Eriksen is central to this study. Specifically, Uhl-Bien (2006) established the ontological foundation of relational leadership, encompassing both entity and relational leader perspectives. Building on this, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) explored the epistemological dimensions, emphasizing the ethical and dialogical aspects of "being-in-relation" (p. 1430). Integrating these perspectives creates a comprehensive, dynamic, and ethically grounded lens for understanding the socially constructed and relational-based experiences and outcomes of leaders navigating a polarized environment.

Uhl-Bien (2006) defines leadership as a social influence process within the RLT framework. To further explore this, she distinguishes between entity and relational perspectives. The entity perspective, historically focused on individual attributes like personality and skills, contrasts with the relational perspective, which centers on the relationships within the leadership context. This distinction is crucial because it shifts the focus from individual actions to the interactions between individuals. Specifically, highlighting relational outcomes reveals how

shared meaning, mutual influence, and co-created realities emerge. Ultimately, Uhl-Bien's work, and this study, aim to move beyond simplistic, individual-centric views of leadership.

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) expanded relational leadership by focusing on the nature of relationships, introducing dialogical and ethical dimensions (see Figure 1). This expansion of relational leadership followed a multiyear qualitative study of federal security leaders at the Transportation Security Authority (TSA). Their concept of "being-in-relation," emphasizes the inherently dialogic (multivoiced) and heteroglossic (intersecting ideologies) ways leaders engage with the world. This moves the leader perspective beyond superficial interactions, highlighting the importance of deep, authentic engagement. Their emphasis on relational dialogue underscores the significance of deliberate communication, active listening, and the valuing of diverse perspectives. Consequently, leadership is understood as a collective process of meaning-making, where varied voices contribute to shared understanding.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Integrating the research of Uhl-Bien (2006) and Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) yields a nuanced conceptual framework of relational leadership. This framework, combining ontological and epistemological perspectives, offers a unique lens for understanding relational dynamics (social influence) and ethical conduct (nature of relationships) when exploring career federal leaders' experiences with polarization. Uhl-Bien's distinction of the relational perspective illuminates the dynamic interplay between individuals and their relationships. Cunliffe and Eriksen's empirical research further enhances this framework by emphasizing the intricacies of dialogue and the ethical dimensions of relational leader interactions.

This synthesis of relational leadership research highlights the interplay between individual attributes and relational dynamics, coupled with ethical principles and open communication. The resulting conceptual framework provides a lens for understanding the leadership shift from a top-down, hierarchical model to one of shared responsibility and mutual influence, a relevant approach for federal leaders collaborating across agencies in an era of polarization. The analytical rigor of Uhl-Bien, combined with the dialogical depth of Cunliffe and Eriksen, provides a comprehensive and impactful understanding of relational leadership in this context.

Summary of the Methodology

To explore how career federal leaders experience ideological polarization in their roles across federal agencies in the NCR, an exploratory qualitative design was selected. This design is commonly used in scholarly research to understand how individuals make meaning of phenomena or situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It aligns with a constructivist worldview, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through participants'

interpretations of their social interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection

Participant recruitment proceeded along three pathways. The first pathway involved the distribution of a study flyer targeting career federal leaders with a scheduling link and email address provided. The selection criteria were visible on the flyer. The second pathway involved the researcher contacting career federal employees on Leadership Connect, a service provided by the George Washington University Gilman Library. Phone contact started with agencies managing politicized policies and programs such as climate change, inflation, and healthcare. Those agencies included the Department of Energy, Department of Treasury, and Department of Health and Human Services. The third and final pathway involved the direct engagement of professional colleagues in the federal government, asking for their participation and distribution of the study flyer to professional networks.

Participant Selection

Participants for this study included nonpolitical career federal leaders with experience in leadership positions in the NCR within the last three to five years. General Schedule (GS), GS-13 to GS-15 (nonpolitical appointee) participants were the focus population for several reasons. First, the GS-13 to GS-15 (or equivalent based on agency scale) employees typically have over a decade of experience in public service. Second, their service experiences provided the depth and understanding for discussion on polarization. Finally, the band of federal leaders was typically directing workgroups and teams, within and across agencies, often without direct authority over members. This meant functionality depended on a nuanced understanding of leadership.

Sites of Research

The combination of basic qualitative research design and a constructive approach best

supports investigating career federal leader experiences with ideological polarization workgroups and teams in the NCR. Merriam (2002) offered that this type of research design aims at understanding how to make sense of participants' everyday lives, with a focus on recalling unique experiences. The research questions used during this study required participants to process their experiences with ideological polarization to enable the goal of understanding, in contrast to other research designs that typically include multiple goals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, the qualitative design, as an exploratory process, works well for building concepts for later development into theory through subsequent supporting methodologies such as a mixed method approach for future research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participant Interviews

To gain an optimal, in-depth connection and understanding of the participants and their respective experiences, data collection consisted of structured and semi-structured interviews. This method of collection was intended to develop detailed thick descriptions in a qualitative research report (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this way, the data provided significant insight about the participants' experiences with ideological polarization at their respective department and agency. This study involved the collection of 15 semistructured interviews with career federal leaders. Conducted in a virtual format, each interview was about 60 minutes.

Critical Incident Technique

This study incorporated the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) for developing interview questions. Flanagan (1954) originally developed CIT for aviation training during World War II, later describing its use in the Army Air Forces' Aviation Psychology Program (Bott & Tourish, 2016). Flanagan (1954) designed CIT as "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of

human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (p. 327). This initial design allowed researchers wide application for collecting data on specific incidents or related series of events (Bott & Tourish, 2016). More recently, CIT has been successfully employed within an interpretive paradigm for inductive research, leading to its adoption across various subdisciplines in organizational studies, including counseling psychology (Bott & Tourish, 2016).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to examine the data to answer the research questions for this study. The interview data was transcribed and consolidated with researcher notes for qualitative content analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014). An inductive approach was used for analysis, which meant the process began with open coding to allow the interview transcripts and researcher notes to determine the preliminary data codes (Cho & Lee, 2014). The outcome of data analysis supported the meaning of the material based on the formatting of categories and themes, which answered the research question (Cho & Lee, 2014). Moreover, the use of qualitative content analysis led to the prioritization of categories and the identification of relationships among codes and categories.

Composite Narrative

As previously mentioned, the 2024 election outcomes, the rise of "DOGE," and an aggressive stance towards federal employees necessitated new considerations for presenting this study's findings. The composite narrative provided a secure solution, ensuring the anonymity of participants as they described their experiences, work, and agencies. This process involved organizing quotes to create a coherent flow and prioritizing readability while preserving the participants' original language (Johnston et al., 2023). Additionally, similar thematic quotes were

compiled, and each segment was given a title to effectively encapsulate its essence.

Trustworthiness

Emergent directions occur in the qualitative research process based on the naturalistic inquiry, which requires due diligence to ensure trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). Thus, trustworthiness was maintained through multiple techniques throughout this study. First, member checking occurred to allow participants to check and validate the findings and to provide feedback to the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Second, the implementation of a three-step approach to data collection enabled the rigorous study of a career federal leaders' behavior in the context of ideological polarization in executive branch agencies.

Reliability

Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend researchers implement and disclose procedures to ensure reliability. For this study, reliability methods included a multistep process for reliability and checking accuracy. First, communication of specific and clear participant selection criteria sought to ensure the right leaders were identified. Along with the call for participants, the proxy survey on relationship leadership behaviors further refined the pool of participants. Second, the initial pilot or screening interview and discussion allowed the researcher to establish reliability and therefore trustworthiness prior to the final stage of data collection, an in-depth participant interview. The primary goal of this rigor was to satisfy potential questions and concerns for reliability through strategies to address trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility.

Ethical Considerations

Approval from the George Washington University Institution Review Board (IRB) was obtained before participant recruitment was initiated or any data collected. Once the study

began, all data was stored on an encrypted hard drive, and participant names were replaced with interview numbers and pseudonyms.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

There were at least four limitations to this study. The first limitation concerns the theoretical scope and participant focus. The study was exclusively focused on the experiences of senior career federal leader while relying on RLT. This created a tension with the design because RLT emphasizes a co-constructed, reciprocal process between leaders and followers. As a result, the focus on only interviewing leaders captured only one perspective of the relational dynamic and limited the ability to fully ascertain the degree of co-construction or the impact of their approaches on direct reports.

The second limitation concerns generalizability and context specificity. The study included a small, nonrandom, purposive sample of 15 federal leaders located exclusively in the NCR. However, the vastness and variety of executive branch agencies and thousands of federal workers in the NCR make the findings of this study highly context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization.

The third limitation concerns the primary source of data, which was in-depth, semistructured interviews. Thus, the findings are based on self-reported perceptions, recollections, and interpretation of events. Accuracy of past events may be imperfect and participants could consciously or unconsciously present themselves in a favorable light.

Finally, the study is limited through researcher positionality and bias. The researcher's views are informed by over two decades of military service, which is especially relevant when interviewing participants of the Department of Defense. This is because a shared experience,

while beneficial for rapport could have some influence on the interpretation of data.

Delimitations

There are several delimitations, strategic choices employed to narrow the scope of the study and enhance achieving deep, context-specific knowledge. While RLT concerns the dual perspective of leaders and followers, the prioritization of leaders as participants is appropriate (and delimiting) for the context of ideological polarization because leaders are directly responsible for translating politically charged policy into actionable guidance. Thus, the study participants were the most astute to describe the context for which leadership occurs.

Secondly, the limitation of geographical scope is delimited by the strategic significance of the organizations, as they all belonged to the executive branch, which are uniformly responsible for translating and executing domestic issues at the direction of the president. As a result, delimiting the scope to this specified geographical center was intended to best capture acute and concentrated examples of ideological polarization in this particular milieu.

Third, the methodological limitation of the study was delimited through the qualitative, in-depth interview methodology. This approach prioritizes securing rich data about the lived experience of ideological polarization, which quantitative methods cannot capture.

Finally, the limitation of the researcher's perspective was delimited through access and rapport. This is because the researcher has the ability to establish credibility within federal spaces, especially as a perceived nonpartisan/apolitical member of the Armed Forces. Thus, the disclosure of the researcher's background serves as a delimitation. Moreover, potential risk of bias is further delimited through the use of qualitative coding and triangulation methods of data analysis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide background on career federal leader experiences and behaviors with workgroup and team ideological polarization in the NCR. Through in-depth interviews of career federal leaders in their environments, this study addressed the following research questions:

- How do career federal leaders describe ideological polarization?
- What are the leadership experiences of career federal leaders in the context of ideological polarization?

The literature examined in this chapter includes the components of ideological polarization to contextualize the career federal leaders interviewed as part of this study. Research on the leader context underpinning ideological polarization such as ideology, social identity, and organizational culture highlights the conditions for polarization to occur among members in workgroups and teams. This literature in this review also includes multiple models of organizational culture to describe the deeper influences on workgroup behavior, as well as the confluence with ideological polarization and leader approaches. Finally, the literature in this review highlights research on different leader approaches, especially in groups, to demonstrate the range of knowledge on leaders responding to ideologically polarized workgroups and teams.

Method of the Literature Review

A systematic literature review was conducted for the purposes of grounding and guiding this exploration of career federal leadership experiences with polarization in the NCR. Torraco (2005) posited that literature reviews are appropriate for systematically examining existing research across varied areas to enable new perspectives. Thus, the selection, analysis, and systematic selection of the literature contained in this review follows the recommendations by

Torraco (2005), as well as Kitchenham and Charters (2007).

Literature Identification

This literature review focused on empirical, theoretical, and conceptual articles located in peer-reviewed online and print scholarly journals. Additionally, book chapters, dissertations, and other types of media were integrated into the review, especially the sections designed to establish the contextual background for the career federal leader's context in the NCR and executive branch of government.

Access to the sources for this study was gained through the George Washington University Gelman Library and the Washington Research Libraries Consortium. The following databases were used to review literature: ABI/Inform, Gender Studies Database, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Ultimate, Social Science Database, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Psychology Databases, SocINDEX with Full Text, Sociology Collection, ProQuest Central, and Web of Science. Sources included books, conference papers and proceedings, dissertations, theses, government and official publications, reports, scholarly journals, and working papers.

The search for literature was completed using the combination of keywords and descriptors in the advance search features of each database. The search terms included:

> *polarization, ideology, or ideological polarization; National Capital Region or NCR; Career Federal Employees or Federal Employees; relational leadership; inclusive leadership; organizational leadership; organizational culture.*

In addition to scholarly writing on polarization, ideology, politics, and leadership, this literature review includes a range of writing on the NCR to situate this study contextually. Moreover, a snowball technique enabled the use of reference lists from the initial articles, books, and

manuscripts to locate additional scholarly texts.

Literature Selection

This study explores the experiences and practices of career federal leaders confronting ideologically polarized workgroups and teams in the NCR. As a result, the empirical research on polarization includes articles and books from 2012 to present, which is associated with the peak of ideological polarization in Congress (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). However, the peak of polarization is not limited to Congress, as other parts of government to include the Supreme Court align with this timeline for increased ideological divergent worldviews among federal officials. Thus, the literature in this review concerning career federal leader includes work that examines concepts and theories associated with the divisions in government since the peak in 2012.

Research on the concepts including empathy, respect, reflexivity, reciprocity, responsiveness, and trust precedes recent empirical work on ideological polarization. Moreover, seminal texts on the executive branch to describe the career leader context required a look back to research on federal organizations at the turn of the last century. Selection criteria help the identification of sources for the purpose of systematic selection as part of the literature review process (Torraco, 2005). Therefore, the following selection criteria was used: 1. Writing includes one or more theories or concepts on ideology, polarization, social identity, and organizational culture; 2. Writing includes one or more theories and concepts on relational leader approaches such as trust, empathy, respect, reflexivity, and reciprocity; 3. Writing includes research on the executive branch of the federal government and the duties of career federal leaders to include oversight of policymaking, program and project development, and evaluation.

Literature Organization

This literature review is divided into two sections: leader context and leader actions. The leader context section concerns conceptual thinking on the NCR and the executive branch of government. The leader context literature also considers research on ideological polarization and outlines literature on the study's conceptual framework components of ideology, social identity, and organization culture. Ideology literature includes discussion on Balkin's (1998) cultural software, while organizational culture considers the evolutionary frameworks by Schein (2010), Hatch (1993), and Alvesson (2012). The section on leader actions outlines seminal research on leader approaches, culminating with the relational approach. Both sections, leader context and leader action, incorporate relevant research on federal organizations and the executive branch integrated into the discussion to link theory to practice. In this way, readers should develop a full appreciation of the practical approach intended for investigating career federal leader experiences and responses to ideological polarized workgroups and teams in the NCR. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature and implications for this study.

Leader Context

This section establishes the critical context of career federal leaders within the NCR, examining the political and social dynamics, alongside the organizational structures in which they operate. Its core purpose is to provide a foundational understanding of the NCR and the evolving nature of the U.S. federal workspace throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. This contextual framing is crucial for comprehending how the confluence of national sentiment and political dynamics influences the decision-making of career federal leaders within federal agencies. Consequently, it illuminates the manifestation of ideologically polarized workgroups and teams within the NCR. While these elements—the NCR context, social identity dynamics,

and the broader political culture—are not the primary focus of this study, they serve as a vital backdrop against which career federal leaders experience and navigate their roles.

Research indicates that the overt visibility of protests, as highlighted by Turner (2005), represents just one facet of polarization among career federal leaders. Social identity, as a fundamental component of group membership, also significantly contributes to the ideological polarization observed in workgroups and teams (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Furthermore, the presidential appointment process exacerbates this phenomenon by strategically placing individuals with strong ideological loyalties at various levels of the executive branch. The often short-lived tenures of senior political appointees, typically changing every four to eight years, starkly contrast with the decades-long careers of civil servants. This combination of ideologically mobilized citizens at federal buildings, the pervasive influence of social group thinking, and direct presidential political control across the executive branch has created challenging conditions for career federal leaders. These conditions necessitate their ability to experience and effectively respond to polarized environments, ultimately ensuring the continuity of policymaking, program evaluation, and project development efforts within government administration.

National Capital Region

The current federal workforce displacement in the NCR is significantly different from the initial construction projects by the U.S. Corps of Engineers early in the 20th Century. The federal workforce moved into the initial tranche of building expansions from 1920 to 1942, manning new buildings for departments and agencies such as the Federal Reserve, National Institute of Health, and the Supreme Court. This was followed by continuous expansion of civil works by the U.S. military engineers from 1970 to 2004 (Scott, 2005). But because space in the District of

Columbia became limited, the federal workforce began to expand to the surrounding counties of Virginia and Maryland.

According to the General Service Administration (GSA) website (2023) federal employees in the NCR make up at least 300,000 members of the workforce. Moreover, GSA states that federal employees occupy 190 federally owned and 500 leased buildings or about 95.6 million square feet of workspace, which exceeds the space available in the District of Columbia and expands into the surrounding states of Maryland and Virginia. Thus, federal employees both work and live in the counties of Fairfax, Arlington, Prince George, and Montgomery (the largest in the region), and the cities of Alexandria and Falls Church. Thus, career federal leaders are widely distributed throughout the NCR and accessible to members of the local community and policy, program, and project interest groups.

The GSA also provides the names of departments and agencies with which these career federal leaders work in the NCR, which further situates the context of this study. Starting with the District of Columbia, a few organizations of interest include: the Department of Defense (a portion of which is officially in Virginia, a pre-American Civil War decision), the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Expanding outward, the Department of Defense has a building (the Mark Center) in Alexandria, Virginia, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has a building in White Flint, Maryland with federal leaders working as well. Moreover, the Social Security Administration's federal leaders occupy space in the Arthur J. Altimeter Building in Baltimore, Maryland. The displacement of the headquarter buildings creates the effect of integrating the workforce throughout the NCR and therefore creates a unique experience for federal leaders charged with managing critical policies. The confluence of national sentiment in response to

issues, echoed by interest groups, creates a polarized context for career federal leaders, as they make concerted efforts to ensure productivity at their respective federal organizations.

According to Hanson (2023) the highly educated federal workforce in the NCR is complemented by a secondary and complementary private sector that mirrors their specialization and competencies. As of 2019, the NCR workforce had the highest level of education among the 150 largest metropolitan areas in the country and one of the most concentrated centers of talent in the world. Hansen argues, in the nation's metropolis, the economy, politics, and development of the Washington region, the most senior positions in government participate in a shuffle betwixt and between government service and positions in industry. This refers to the political appointment authorities each presidential administration selects trusted agents for positions throughout government. In this way, the career federal leader becomes the permanent fixture and continuity of federal policy initiatives, or the lack thereof. This is important for understanding the workgroup dynamics described by leaders in this study as it pertains to the importance of federal employees at the workgroup level and their critical roles in initiatives from concept to implementation.

The Executive Branch of Government

Aberbach and Peterson (2005) argued the executive branch is designed to administratively serve the public interest. Despite the complicated nature of bureaucracy, there are three basic models used in the twentieth century. Each model offers insight on how career federal leaders take part in the work of policy, programs, and projects. The first is the "scientific management" model, which focuses on operational efficiency, arriving in the first third of the twentieth century (Aberbach & Peterson, 2005, p. 243). This first model is a derivative of private organizations with the pursuit of defining managerial objectives and monitoring performance.

The second model is “policy management,” which marries political executives with career federal officials of the senior executive service to devise policy options and monitor performance (Aberbach & Peterson, 2005, p. 244). This second model developed in the 1960s and is associated with the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS) methodology, an incremental and linear fiscal system for adjusting program funding.

The third model is “public choice” and is based on constriction of federal government agencies in the 1960s to prevent career federal officials from pushing personal and institutional agendas against political executives (Aberbach & Peterson, 2005, p. 244). Instead, this “new public management” assumes goods and services are purchased by the representatives in Congress and their constituents (Aberbach & Peterson, 2005, p. 244). This last model was specifically designed to reduce and eliminate what officials saw as dysfunctional, self-aggrandizing entrepreneurship among permanent career federal officials. Each model ensured linear administrative processes across the federal government, especially in the case of the executive branch.

In the 21st century, administrative models are increasingly viewed through the lens of the unitary theory of executive power. This theory asserts that the President of the United States wields comprehensive and exclusive control over the entire executive branch, deriving this authority directly from Article II of the Constitution (Calabresi & Yoo, 2008). Proponents of this theory argue that all executive power granted by the Constitution is vested solely in the president. This implies that executive branch agencies and their officials, including career civil servants, function as direct extensions of presidential authority. From this perspective, the president possesses inherent power to direct, supervise, and remove executive branch officers

without legislative interference, thereby ensuring direct accountability and fidelity to the president's policy agenda (Calabresi & Rhodes, 1992).

This theory directly challenges any administrative model that might suggest a significant degree of independent bureaucratic expertise or discretion, setting up potential tension with approaches like "policy management." Simultaneously, it explicitly reinforces the constraining impulse often associated with "public choice" theory, which emphasizes self-interested behavior within government. Understanding these administrative frameworks in conjunction with the unitary theory illuminates the ongoing struggle over the balance of power between elected political leadership and the career civil service within the federal government.

The net effect of the ongoing debate over the unitary theory of executive power has increased political control over the bureaucracy. The more recent dismantling efforts within the federal government, exemplified by executive actions from DOGE in the second Trump administration, represent the culmination of a decades-long trend of presidents expanding their power over the bureaucracy (Calabresi & Yoo, 2008; Howell, 2025). The first Trump administration (2017-2021) notably sought to reclassify tens of thousands of federal positions from the general schedule to Schedule F, a category with limited protections from dismissal. This initiative specifically targeted roles involved in policy-making or advising positions directly relevant to the participants in this study. While the Biden administration (2021-2025) reversed this decision, beginning in 2025, the second Trump administration has reinstated similar efforts under the new designation, "Schedule Policy/Career," through Executive Order 14171 and subsequent proposed rules by the Office of Personnel Management.

In addition to the use of executive authority for personnel reclassification, the unitary executive theory debate has led to increased political control over federal agencies through the

direct lines of communication, reporting requirements, and authority structures based on the president's agenda. Today, this is evident with "dual-hatted" political appointees, where, for instance, a secretary of state might control multiple organizations or initiatives outside the traditional purview of their department. This phenomenon traces back to the first Trump administration's efforts, such as the Director of the Office of Management and Budget implementing direct reporting requirements specifically aimed at smaller government agencies, effectively centralizing control and bypassing traditional bureaucratic channels.

Ideological Polarization

This section discusses literature on the foundations of ideological polarization to demonstrate the linkages to the workplace environment and thereby support argument for understanding the experiences of federal workforce leaders. The components of ideological polarization described in the literature consists of ideology, social identity, and organizational culture. Writing on ideology, or reality construction, provides the foundation of ideological polarization. Moreover, social identity research provides the theoretical underpinning for understanding affective behaviors or negative views towards outgroups. Finally, organizational culture situates and explains the reason ideological polarization may flourish or become nonexistent.

While the concept of ideological polarization is widely discussed in public discourse, the researcher acknowledges the existence of a scholarly debate on the statistical prevalence. The debate on polarization is largely among political scientists who argue that the electorate and society is not as polarized as some scholars claim based on their interpretation of quantitative data, such as voting records or bimodal distribution of political affiliation (Benson, 2024; Schedler, 2023; Levin et.al., 2021) These scholars suggest the mass public remains relatively

moderate, which impacts the participant experiences of this study. However, this study proceeds from the premise that statistical interpretation of ideological alignment does not fully capture the lived reality of ideological polarization within the organizational context. In this way the context of this study plays a significant role.

Ideology

Scholars do not agree on the direction and placement of ideological research, as some view the need to maintain an interdisciplinary approach, while others insist on the sorting of ideology strictly with politics (Van Dijk, 1998; Freeden, 2003). However, scholars seem to agree that ideology at the core represents the practice of making sense of new events (reality) and experiences and distinguishing meaning in the context of previous events and experiences (Van Dijk, 1998; Freeden, 2003). This section examines the research on ideology showing how the concept supports the study of ideological polarization.

Van Dijk (1995) approached the study of ideology through the analysis of discursive structures. In essence, the strategy for ideology historically belonged to the expression of social and personal opinions with a positive self-presentation and a negative presentation of other. This in concert with the task of hiding one's own negative acts and another's good ones. Van Dijk placed a premium on conversation, which used hyperboles, fear-arousing, and doomsday scenarios and warnings where possible. Comparisons of personas to villains and those generally conceived as evil make common practices for ideological expression. Prime periods in contemporary history include the anti-communist Cold War and the Global War on Terror. Those examples are easy enough for the use of ideological discourse. However, a more nuanced example is the role of Israel in the Middle East conflict, which includes the occupation of

Palestine. Here, Van Dijk underscores the use of ideological discourse to shift the balance of ideas among policymakers and the West, for that matter.

Freeden (2003) aligns with the group of scholars who view ideology strictly as a political device. In Freeden's view, the word is borrowed for generalization or to indicate a vague notion of cultural ideas to provide practitioner access. Scholars in the same camp as Freeden center Marxism and the process of control used by ideology, which provides a utility for political functions. In other words, ideology performs the driving force for political action. However, Freeden does concede that for the non-Marxist scholar, the study of ideology includes the larger process of decoding, identifying structures, contexts, and motives not immediately visible in daily observations.

Like Van Dijk (1995), Martin (2021) associated ideology with discourse as part of a poststructuralist critique of elements of human culture. Martin defines ideology as collections of false claims about the world to reinforce social domination. Again, the use of discourse in concert with ideology aids understanding of social phenomenon, which, in this case, Martin is focused on as a means of understanding culture. However, Martin explores the ideology canon to support his study on discourse and ideology, which reintroduced Mannheim (1954) for an approach to ideology. Mannheim (1954) used ideology as a mechanism for explaining knowledge production and the problem of competing empirical claims about the world. Use of the word ideology came to distinguish the different realities and their associated interests, where applicable.

Considering the multiple scholarly views on the topic of ideology, and ideological polarization for that matter, this research most closely aligns with Ostrowski's (2022) latest work on the subject. Ostrowski views ideology as a worldview or overarching philosophy, that is

constructed by integrated individual or collective claims, beliefs, or thinking. Ideology does not have truthfulness or falseness. Rather, ideology is presented as a set of claims about reality, as it is, or should be, capturing societal forces. Ideology is a manifestation of the tension between our perception and our experience of society. With this explanation of ideology, Ostrowski provides an entry point for behavioral engagement, more specifically, the outlooks and attitudes on the reality we experience and the conflict with outlooks and attitudes opposite ours.

Private Sector Polarization

Research on polarization illustrates partisan activities in private organizations across a political spectrum. For example, liberal Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) tend to favor evenhandedness, while conservative CEOs tend to accept greater disparity in the distribution of resources (Gupta & Briscoe, 2016). Centered on the upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Simon, 1957), which posits that executives often make decisions based on their assumptions and beliefs, Gupta et al. (2018) found that CEO ideology drives resource allocation by measuring capital allocation among 278 multibusiness Fortune 500 firms from 2000 to 2012. Regression models revealed that CEO liberalism was positively associated with evenhandedness in capital allocation (Gupta et al., 2018). Increased levels of liberalism across the organization strengthened the relationship between CEOs' ideology and the even distribution of capital. This study marked a point of departure, as previous research on CEOs focused on professional experiences and personality influencing strategic decision-making instead of personal values in the context of a conservatism-liberalism continuum (Gupta et al., 2018).

Polarization research also includes the concept of organizational political ideology (shortened to organizational ideology, for ease) guiding corporate openness to social activism, as measured by concessions to activists' demands (Gupta & Briscoe, 2020). Viewed on an axis of

conservatism to liberalism, organizational ideology represents prevailing beliefs among organizational members about how the social world operates, to include convictions on desirable outcomes and methods for achievement (Gupta & Briscoe, 2020). This idea went against previous research that suggested CEO ideology guided corporate social response. Instead, in the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), researchers found that organizational ideology or "body politic" was a stronger predictor of practices than CEO ideology upper management teams (Gupta et al., 2017, p. 526).

Gupta and Briscoe (2020) tested the hypothesis of organizational ideology and its effects on corporate response to external sociopolitical pressures through interviews of CSR officers at five major corporations in the United States. All interviewees revealed a response process that included the consultation of line/staff managers and division heads. Moreover, input from internal stakeholders was often combined with company values and culture when determining criteria for response (Gupta & Briscoe, 2020). The authors mated a unique dataset of protest events from 2001 to 2015 with companies of those interviewed to assess the extent to which corporate responses were affected by organizational ideology. Concession (or agreement with protestors via press release) served as the independent variable, while organizational liberalism (measured in donations from organizational members), employee donor proximity to headquarters, community liberalism (measured in community member donations), and industry liberalism served as dependent variables. After controlling for CEO liberalism, unionized workforce, and media coverage of protests, Gupta and Briscoe found that organizational liberalism positively affects a company's likelihood of concession. They also found the effect of organizational liberalism is greater based on proximity to the company headquarters.

There are two commonly used approaches to board structures. The first does not allow non-Chief Executive Officers (non-CEOs) on boards, which creates the effect of a lone-insider board structure (Gupta et al., 2022). The lone-insider model appeals to conservatives based on their beliefs in clear lines of authority and unity of command. The second approach to board structuring separates the CEO and board chairperson roles for a distribution of power (Gupta et al., 2022). The CEO-chair separation model appeals to liberal directors based on stronger preferences to avoid the concentration of power. Evidence suggests that the corporations are split on the efficacy of both models, as 2018 data from the S&P 500 shows 60 percent of firm boards have lone-insider models, while 50 percent have a CEO-chairperson split.

Gupta et al. (2022) measured the effects of each type of governance model by looking at firms that made an appearance in the S&P 500 from 1997 to 2016, examining their public financial data and information on political donations. Sample sizes for the lone-insider model and CEO-chair model included 4,537 firm-year observations (730 firms) and 3,243 firm-year observations (444 firms) respectively. The study found that political ideology influenced the design of board structures, and thus governance practices, especially around the time of the 2002 SOX Act, which enacted regulation for higher governance quality. Increased board director conservatism led to adoption of the lone-CEO model, while liberalism led to CEO-chair separation, as measured by firm structural appearances and political activity (donations, etc.). This finding further supports the upper echelons theory, which involves executives injecting their personal "givens"—knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs—into their business decisions (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Simon & March, 1957).

Public Sector Polarization

Research on the contextual experiences and behaviors of career federal leaders in the executive branch centers on the concept of the "Administrative Presidency," a term coined by Richard Nathan in 1976. Nathan studied the strategy employed by President Richard Nixon to maintain control over domestic bureaucracy during his administration. Members of the Nixon administration provided answers to historical questions, such as, should the president control bureaucracy, and if so, how much control should there be? (Nathan, 1976).

Nathan (1985) offered that Nixon's strategy was relatively simple for a divided government, that is, appoint loyalists at the lowest levels possible to ensure the White House maintained control of the entire federal administrative apparatus (Nathan, 1985; Rockman, 2009). Rockman (2009) brought together dozens of scholars in a symposium to synthesize research on the topic of the "Administrative Presidency" claiming that while the appointment system historically served as a tool reserved for the president, it became a sure way for achieving agendas. The volume of research on this topic suggests the depth of theoretical development. Rockman (2009) found the Nixon administration believed their strategy was especially critical for ensuring loyalists maintained an agenda they were unsure of but were required to support when presented.

Executive branch career federal leaders have experienced the most significant disruption to organizations following the Civil Service Reform act of 1978. Durant (1992) researched the conflict between career civil servants and political appointees during land reform policy implementation at the Bureau of Land Management. President Ronald Regan adopted Nixon's strategy of appointing loyalists while calling for the reduction of career civil servants and hiring freezes. Aberbach and Peterson (2005) argued the paradox of politicization, the selection of

ideologically aligned appointees lacking skill and/or expertise, is less of a concern than loyalty to the president at multiple levels of executive branch agencies. This paradox compounds early research by Aberbach and Peterson (2000) which found that senior civil service members often held ideological views that countered those of appointees. Ironically, Aberbach and Peterson found that a significant concern for those implementing the administrative presidency system was that of political appointees "going native" or falling into the circles of career federal leaders. Senior aides in the George W. Bush administration required cabinet secretaries responsible for domestic issues to spend significant time at the White House for meetings to ensure they understood the president's position on issues.

Resh (2015) found the polarization of civil servant ranks became a source of distrust between political appointees and careerists over time. Thus, what started as a way of ensuring control and centralizing decision-making has created a paradoxical effect. Resh posited that the reciprocated distrust inhibited the president's (and appointees') ability to develop institutional competence and implement policy agendas due to the fact that some career federal leaders operated with a negative view of political appointees. Resh found that some career federal leaders felt appointees viewed them as untrustworthy or liable to leak sensitive agency information.

Both the Clinton and Obama administrations took a different approach to their interactions with career federal leaders at executive branch agencies. Shafie (2020) found that Clinton reduced the number of appointees and directly supported the proposals of career federal leaders, albeit along partisan lines such as environmental preservation. Moreover, Shafie found the National Performance Review, a comprehensive study on how the government does business, had a significant impact on the trust of career officials. The Obama administration took the same

approach to unifying the vision of how government should work and agendas between career leaders and their political counterparts. Shafie noted a direct appeal made on the part of the Obama administration to organizations, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, speaking to a crowd of 200 employees to demonstrate support for those working to carry out the president's legislative agenda. Here again, the connections were drawn closer between the president, career officials, and appointees at organizations aligned with the president's policy goals.

Recent research on polarization in federal organizations includes workspaces such as the legislative branch where different viewpoints from throughout the United States coalesce in the process of lawmaking. However, polarization research in federal organizations includes places such as the Department of Defense, where varying viewpoints threaten the practice of effective national security. Mentzer (2021) studied the effect of political polarization on legislation and policymaking in the U.S. Congress, with particular attention on committees, as well as the types of bills passed annually. The research expanded the literature by asking if polarization limited the types of bills passed in Congress based on constituencies and found the number of group and geographic laws passed each year have decreased. Additionally, Mentzer found that polarization is affecting the productivity of the committees themselves.

McCarty's 2019 research offered an aggregate view of the U.S. government, finding that polarization increases differences in preferences between political appointees and career civil servants. This division has created the potential for undermining the political control over departments and agencies. Moreover, McCarty found a significant number of ideological differences across all departments and agencies during the same administration. This means even political appointees within the same administration are liable to fall out of lockstep due to polar

viewpoints on policy approaches. Funderburke (2019) used an analytical regression time series model and qualitative analysis to understand the growing ideological divide on national security legislation regarding the decision to use force over time. The study found the increase in polarization between the two major parties puts the collective national security of the U.S. at risk through the policy making process.

Social Identity

Social identity theory (SIT) is critical to understanding ideological polarization in the context of career federal leaders. This theory concerns the dynamic interactions between groups, as worldviews or ideas cluster among in-group members. Tajfel et al. (date?) demonstrated the specific characteristics of the in-group as part of seminal research in the late 20th century. Three critical experiments by Tajfel established the foundations for SIT or, more precisely, in-group behavior. The opening salvo of the SIT canon effectively linked polarized thoughts to behaviors within and between groups through experimentation with intergroup discrimination. Tajfel's (1970) initial study of group behavior demonstrated how criteria for group assignments occur and highlighted the outcomes of dispositions between groups. If given a choice or an exercise in decision-making, an in-group member will make decisions that reflect overall benefit for their group rather than for the benefit of another in-group member. Put simply, individuals behave according to their perceptions of appropriate intergroup behavior.

Tajfel et al. (1971) followed up initial research on groups with several experiments which furthered the theory on in-group membership and behavior. An interesting outcome of a second research report was that if members of a group do not know each other well, they tend to act in ways that benefit the ad hoc intergroup categorization. In other words, in-group members will function in the direction of generic social norms, as perceived relevant to the social conduct they

are confronted with. Workgroups comprised of different members from various external agency or in-groups would theoretically act in the best interest of the established group norms.

Tajfel's (1974) third paper on intergroup behavior clarified the phenomenon in question linking the individual and social processes to outline the empirical relationships. Tajfel posited that previous social, economic, and political variables take an autonomous function in the group decision process. Conflict between social identities becomes inevitable during the intergroup comparative process of establishing legitimacy. Here, Tajfel establishes a prediction of hostility between group members as a derivative of stereotypes and is observed through intergroup attitudes and discrimination behaviors. Ultimately, Tajfel's 1974 research established the theory that group behavior falls on a continuum. On one end, a group member is acting for self and, on the other, for the group. The actions and decisions of group members will always account for either ends of the extreme—the self or the group during the intergroup process. The problem (or phenomenon) occurs when individuals import their social categories to intergroup behavior and decisions, which Tajfel describes as "non-overlapping social group" actions (p.?).

Tajfel's (date?) work revealed that two related conditions will determine behavior of group members or acting on behalf of group over self. The first condition is separating a dichotomy of social settings into discrete (non-overlapping) categories. The second is emphasizing the impossibility or difficulty of moving from one group to another. These conditions are amplified by the presence of clear messages establishing *us* and *them*. Despite the decades passing since Tajfel's research, the conditions described in the theory are present in 21st century America, which continues to provide salience to his work.

Turner et al. (1987) further established the cognitive element of SIT in their work on social categorization theory (SCT). Though not explicitly part of the career federal leader

context, SCT may present relevance in future work seeking to understand ideological polarization among workgroups and teams in the NCR. Social identity links to social categorization theory as one of three levels of self-categorization, which also include human identity and personal identity (Turner et al., 1987). The incorporation of levels marked the shift away from viewing interpersonal and intergroup dynamics on a bipolar spectrum (Hornsey, 2008). Turner and Haslam (1991) made a further determination of the process for an individual's selection of identity. This is done through the idea of fit, which could be comparative and normative. Put another way, an individual will either maximize differences or fall in line with group expectations. Both SIT and SCT has become a critical source of information for leadership research, specifically centering how leaders should think, feel, and act (Hornsey, 2008). Crucially, understanding the prototypical (average group member) behavior of the in-group has provided leaders with tools to influence the basis of power and control over resources (Hornsey, 2008).

The notion of prototypical behavior became central to the association of SIT to leadership. Hogg (2001) proposed three core components to social identity salience: prototypicality, social attraction, and attribution and information processing. Leaders influence group members through a prototypical disposition. Social attraction has to do with the leader's ability to develop likability among group members. Hogg (2001) noted that research supports the findings of increased compliance because of likability. Finally, attribution and information processing involve the cognitive fusion of prototypicality and social attraction by group members. In other words, the combination of these concepts facilitates effective and active leadership in group settings. With the foundational research on social identity and leadership theories, scholars have continued testing concepts to reinforce emerging findings.

Hogg et al. (2012) argued that, in the SIT of leadership, identity is influenced both by the group and the leaders. While group members select prototypicality, entrepreneurial leaders (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) can construct and manage perceptions of the groups prototype or control the group's conceptualization of the group's identity (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Reicher & Hopkins, 2003; Seyranian, 2012; Seyranian & Bligh, 2008). There are several strategies aligned with the ways leaders manage their own prototypicality and thus group identity. Several scholars have suggested these strategies include the use of rhetoric, strategic communication, and behavior supporting rhetoric (Hogg et al., 2012; Stone et al., 1997). In essence, prototypical leaders talk up and talk down their behavior among group members to control perception. Hogg et al. (2012) and others extended the applicability of the situational identity theory of leadership to demonstrate the future viability of research on the topic.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture underpins the study of a leader's challenges, especially when examining behavioral responses to ideological polarization, which is important to understanding the experiences and practices of career federal leaders at departments and agencies in the NCR. The seminal texts by Goodwill (1985) and Wilson (1991) describing bureaucracy in the U.S. government offer a starting point for understanding the organizational cultures relevant to this study and later discussion on conceptual frameworks. These seminal texts are also important because they provide a practitioner perspective to the examination of organizational culture.

Goodsell (1985) made a case for bureaucracy (also the book title) to dispel myths about federal departments and agencies. In doing so, he describes the dynamics of culture in federal departments and agencies. At the time of his research, he found that, overall, the bureaucratic

cultures, while varied, are amenable to change. This specific problem of his research and subsequent findings was in response to suggestions based on observations that the structure and hierarchical nature of bureaucracies meant a culture of inertia, inflexibility, and reluctance to change.

Wilson (1991) followed Goodsell's work examining U.S. federal departments and agencies, dedicating an entire chapter about culture. The result of this research reveals contrasting views on work as a government official with many at offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Army Corps of Engineers, and Social Security Administration operating with a distinct behavior. In other words, they embodied the views of those that shaped those organizations at the founding such as J. Edgar Hoover, Sylvanus Thayer, and Arthur Altmeyer. The ethos of the founding fathers lived on through the culture as it guided tacit expectations on the beliefs and behaviors of organizational members long after those men.

However, Wilson (1991) does acknowledge the generalizations made throughout his research and offers that organizations can have multiple cultures. A clear case of this multiplicity is outlined in his description of the budding cultures within the Central Intelligence Agency between traditional intelligence officers and those in the field of counterintelligence. The counter-intel focused groups were generally viewed as paranoid during the Cold War when the focus for intelligence officers was locating and inducing Russian spies to defect. Counterintelligence officers were generally saying no to any alleged defector, while the traditional intelligence officers had a mission to gain any information advantage possible for the U.S. government. These differences in views often led to a subculture clash with those in counterintelligence often losing to the larger agency mission.

The work of Goodsell and Wilson (dates?) in describing the cultures of the U.S. federal government departments and agencies set the stage for the theoretical foundations supporting their observations. Schein et al. (date?) provide frameworks to explain why culture is such a powerful force in organizations. To Shein (1984, 2010), the problem is best explained through a linear model or levels including artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions. For Hatch (1993, 2004), the model of cultural dynamics builds on the Schein's levels including symbols as an additional element of the model for understanding culture. Finally, Alvesson (2012) developed a distinct model, separate from both Schein and Hatch, using language, stories, and rituals to examine organizational culture. Collectively, these theoretical models provide multiple vantage points for the study of both the context and/or challenge of leaders navigating ideological polarization.

Shein's Model

Schein's (1984) early conceptualization of organizational culture paved the way for later (and continuous) examination of the topic and the explanatory efforts for developing an understanding of the phenomenon. The main component of his initial definition still holds today:

> Organizational culture is the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 3)

Three Levels

Schein's framework enables analysis of organizational culture at different levels starting with visible artifacts and creations, which includes first technology, art, and visible and audible

behavior patterns. Next, organizational values offer insight into the governance of behaviors. Finally, underlying assumptions, derived from the unconscious, determine how groups think and feel. This combination of concepts morphs into the existence of cultural paradigms, driving interactions in the form of patterns according to Schein. This early work enabled the future study of organizations' behavior and the identification of cultural patterns.

Schein's (2010) book on organizational culture followed his initial article with a more robust explanation of the concept and case studies. The book also offers an expatiation of the relationship between leadership and culture, which he describes as having a shaping function. Schein leveraged experience consulting and created case studies for examples of culture in organizations. In Schein's experience, the cycle of group formation starts from an originating event and follows several stages including: 1. Group formation; 2. Group building; 3. Group work; and 4. Group maturity. At the final stage, group maturity, group differences begin developing, as creativity and member differences are seen as a threat to the assumption that prior group success derived from functional paradigms. Organizations follow the establishment of groups, which, in turn, bring their cumulated values and assumptions described in the Schein's linear model. This presents especially troubling outcomes for career federal employees with the responsibility of creating new policies directed at issues, which group members view as old problems.

Hatch's Model

Hatch (1993) argued that Schein's (1985) model lacked the contextual depth of organizational culture without the consideration of symbols and processes. As a result, Hatch added to Schein's work with the creation of a dynamic cultural model, linking symbols to assumptions, values, and artifacts. Moreover, Hatch's addition of processes indicated with

arrows for forward (proactive/prospective) and backwards (retrospective/retroactive) temporal operating modes, enables the dynamism prescribed in the rebooted framework. The organizational culture model produced by Schein describes a unidirectional and temporal chain of events, which limits the possibility for change. Hatch's model, however, solves this issue with the theory with the introduction of arrows, from both values and symbols to assumptions. Effectively, change can occur within the reaction to foreign or "alien" values and during the process of interpretation, which invites changes in assumptions.

Cultural Dynamics

The four major processes (focal elements) included in Hatch's (date) dynamic model of organized culture, which she refers to as cultural dynamics, include: 1. Manifestation (assumption-values); 2. Realization (values-artifacts); 3. Symbolization (artifacts-symbols); and 4. Interpretation (symbols-assumptions). The processes incorporate Schein's components of values, artifacts, and assumptions, which demonstrate the continued utility of the earlier organizational culture model. Hatch is clear in writing that the cultural dynamics model does not make Schein's work invalid. Instead, the cultural dynamics perspective incorporates the symbolic-interpretive processes impacting cultural assumptions. In this way, Hatch's model better articulates Schein's theory, extending the possibilities for future research.

Alvesson's Model

Recognizing the salient nature of organizational culture research, Alvesson (2012) created a model based on the components of expression to better enable practitioner understanding. Maintaining an agreement with the centrality of artifacts, values, and assumptions, Alvesson's model shifts slightly away from processes brought forth by Hatch. The variance comes from the focus on how people ascribe meaning to nontrivial things and create a

shared experience through communication and activities. This is done through the identification of language, stories, and rituals, which Alvesson views as the core elements of organizational culture or the transmission of communication, actions, and feelings.

Language, Stories, and Rituals

Alvesson argues for the expression of organizational culture through language, as differences in vocabularies have a shaping effect. The quickest example of this concept is the usage of slogans by different companies. One such example of the intersection of language and culture was the Information Technology Company in Alvesson's research with the slogan of "fun and profit" (Alvesson, 1995, p.?). While the possibility existed of an empty slogan, Alvesson found that company members took the slogan seriously, guiding managerial actions in different situations (Alvesson, 2012).

Alvesson offered that stories are vehicles for conveying the values, ideas, and beliefs, which move throughout the organization, providing indicators for the thinking and acting of members. This description of storytelling in the context of organizational culture supports both the process dynamics of culture forwarded by Hatch and the levels of cultural analysis presented by Schein. Alvesson also offered that stories have a mediating effect between members and their perceptions of the organization through the construction of ideologically biased views.

The final component of Alvesson's organizational cultural framework concerns the human patterns of behavior, which he refers to as rituals and represent a further expression of the organization's values. The types of ritual examples Alvesson provides in his research involve meeting formalities, such as the arrangement of seating and other actions. He cites the example of his experience with one company where members always removed their jackets during meetings and entered the room in reverse order to their status. The most junior members of the

organization always arrived first with the most senior arriving last. This concept could be further expanded to other nonverbal or verbal cues in the meeting process and add depth to understanding an organization's culture through interpretation.

Leadership Experience

This section discusses key theories and concepts in leadership literature to provide a foundation for researching how career federal leaders experience leadership in the context of ideological polarization. The discussion of leadership research will first describe the leadership research canon in general followed by focused discussion on leadership actions and settings or team and workgroup-centered theories. In this way, this portion of the literature review aims to demonstrate how scholars would expect a career federal leader to respond to ideological polarization in their respective workgroup and team environments.

Defining Leadership

Attempting to find a unified definition of leadership is futile and the same goes for a general theory of leadership. Moreover, leadership scholars have historically conflated theories of leadership as definitions. Bass and Bass (2009) described this research challenge in their handbook on leadership. Their presentation of scholarly confusion provides evidence of the futile nature of trying to locate a definition of leadership in writing. Bass and Bass (2009) argued that other scholars such as Rost (1993) located 221 definitions of leadership across 587 publications and that those definitions confused social influence as well as coordination and control with leadership. They also argued that Rost (1993) confused definitions with theories of leadership as working definitions. Burns (2012) argues pointedly on the issue, suggesting the absence of a school on leadership. Burns contends the problem with this absence of structure for understanding the phenomenon of leadership is the difficulty with making distinctions between

types of leaders and distinguishing leaders from rulers.

Yukl (2006) defines leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 15). Bass and Bass (2009) also attempt a definition, asserting, "Leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and of the perceptions and expectations of the members" (p. 30). Burns (2012) took yet another approach to understanding leadership through the association with power. He argued, "Leadership is an aspect of power, but it is also a separate and vital process in itself" (p. 32). Burns views leadership, when apart from power, as transactional and transformative. The former, transactional leadership, involves a value exchange, while the latter concerns the linking of power for a common purpose through mutual support and with a moral purpose

Given the challenges and variance of defining leadership, scholars have attempted to approach leadership through dimensions, components, and themes (Bass & Bass, 2009). The dimensions of leadership in the 1920s concerned impressing the will of the leader on those led to obtain obedience, respect, and loyalty (Bass & Bass, 2009). In the 1930s, people began to view leadership as a process with leaders moving and organizing people in a direction, while in the 1940s leadership concerned the ability to persuade (Bass & Bass, 2009). Finally, Bass and Bass (2009) argued that leadership dimensions in the 1960s involved the ability to influence others. This 20th century dialogue on leadership concerns six themes, which McFarland et al (1993) identified as: 1. Leadership outside the domain of boss, 2. Leadership facilitating others, 3. Leadership is separate from management, 4. Leadership has humanistic sensitivities, 5. Leaders require a holistic approach with a variety of qualities, skills, and capabilities, and 6. Leadership

is the mastery of anticipating, initiation, and change. However, some scholars such as Dugan (2024) question the value of leadership definitions related to the existing base of knowledge, which at this point is solely focused on theory.

In reviewing leadership research spanning multiple decades, the following definition is offered to support this study: Leadership is the act of influencing, motivating, and enabling others for the purpose of achieving intended goals in team, workgroup, organization, and other settings (House et al., 2002; Carreiro & Oliveira, 2019; Solis et al., 2023). This composite definition represents the multiplicity of research focused on the leader, followers, context, and actions. Moreover, this definition forms a foundation for further review of relevant leadership literature topics and ultimately understanding the actions a career federal leader might employ in the context of ideologically polarized workgroups and teams in the NCR.

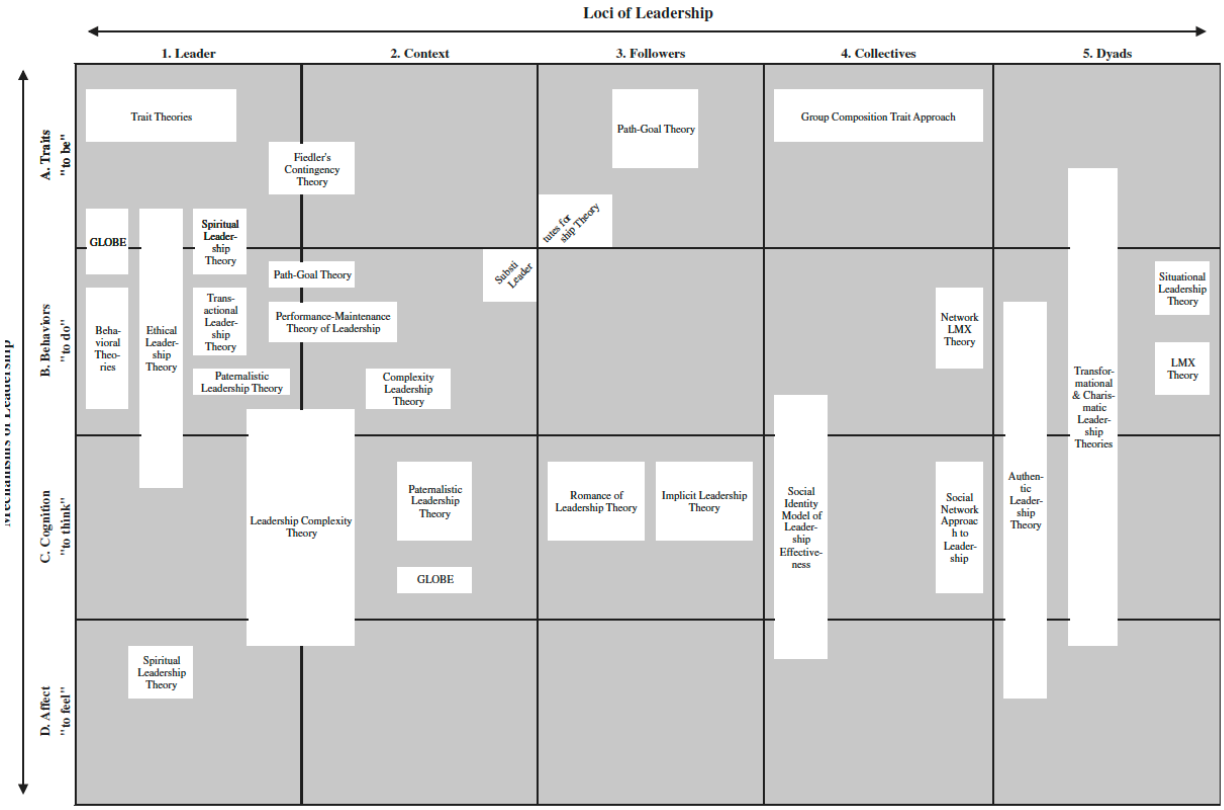
Leadership Theory Framework

Following a qualitative study of the last century of leadership research, Hernandez et al. (2011) developed a leadership theory framework organized into loci and mechanisms dimensions (see Figure 3). The loci of leadership dimension include research on the source of leadership describing the work of scholars seeking to determine if the leader is the initiator of leadership in their theory development. To that end, as Hernandez et al. (2011) point out, there are various leadership theories that conceptualize the locus as the individual leader, multiple people (groups of followers), and the context of leaders and followers. Conversely, mechanisms of leadership dimensions consolidate research on how leadership is enacted or the exertion of influence, which links back to the constructed definition of leadership for this study.

Hernandez et al. (2011) further organized the leadership theory dimensions of loci and mechanisms into several subcategories for each dimension. The loci or sources of leadership

theories have five subcategories: leader, follower, leader-follower dyad, collective, and context. These loci subcategories range from the most traditional to the most progressive, or literature focused on the leader to literature focused on the context. In contrast (or on the axis), the mechanism leadership theories have four subcategories, which include traits, behaviors, cognition, and affect. Again, as with the loci subcategories, the mechanism subcategories are listed from the most traditional research to the most recent, or from trait to affect. Hernandez et al. (2011) noted the dimensions subcategories, while ranging from traditional to modern, do not fall along a continuum.

Figure 2: Two-Dimension Framework



Note. From Hernandez et al., 2011

Based on the Hernandez et al. (2011) framework for leadership theory research, the categories or the leadership loci and mechanisms relevant to this study include behaviors and collectives. Having already described the study context of career federal leaders earlier in this chapter, the discussion that follows on leadership theories is intended to suggest how career federal leaders might effectively respond when confronted with polarized workgroups and teams. Behaviors mechanisms of leadership include research on leaders oriented on tasks and people, while collectives concern research focused on where leadership occurs such as workgroups and teams.

Mechanisms of Leadership

Research on how leadership is enacted, or the mechanisms of leadership, began in the late 1940s with Stogdill's (date?) work, which argues the need for studying more than just leadership traits (Hernandez et al., 2011; Northouse, 2018). There are two significant early studies on the behavioral approach of leadership research: the Ohio State leadership studies (date?) and the University of Michigan leadership studies (date?). Researchers at Ohio State used Stogdill's work and created a questionnaire for organizational followers to complete on the number and types of behaviors of leaders they observed. Beginning from an original list of 1,800 items describing behaviors, Hemphill and Coons (1957) generated a questionnaire of 150 questions called the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). The LBDQ was used in many types of organizational settings and was eventually shortened by Stogdill in 1963. The researchers found that responses to the questions clustered around two types of leader behaviors: initiating structure and consideration (Stogdill, 1974).

The researchers at University of Michigan focused on the effect of leader behaviors on

the performance of small groups (Cartwright & Zander, 1970). They identified two types of behaviors: employee orientation and production orientation. The former, employee orientation, is defined as the behavior of leaders who approach followers with a strong human relations emphasis and interest in workers as human beings (Bowers & Seashore, 1966). Similar to the concept of employee orientation in the Michigan studies, the Ohio State studies identified this phenomenon as consideration behaviors (Northouse, 2018). The latter, production orientation, consists of leadership behaviors that stress the technical and production aspects of a job. Workers are viewed as a means for getting work accomplished (Bowers & Seashore, 1966). In this way production orientation is similar to the initiation structure behavior found during the Ohio State studies (Northouse, 2018).

Northouse (2018) believes the best known model for managerial behavior is the managerial grid, which goes back to the 1960s and has been revised several times (Blake & McCanse, 1991; Blake & Mouton, 1964, 1978, 1985). The grid, now referred to as the leadership grid, explains how leaders help organizations reach their goals through two factors: concern for production and concern for people. Despite the description as learning orientations in the model, the two factors are like the task and leadership behaviors from earlier research.

People-Oriented

Another way of looking at the process of leadership involves the relational and emotional sides of human experiences. According to Hughes et al. (2015), leadership situations integrate thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, goals, and ambitions, which challenge even the most seasoned professionals in organizations. Leaders use relational approaches to appeal to followers for influencing action because of these dynamics. Hollander's (1978) seminal interactional framework for understanding the dynamism of leadership enabled early relational research. The

framework considers three elements of leadership: the leader, the followers, and the situation. The construction of leadership components also allowed for scholars to study or analyze each component separately. However, the overlapping nature, as suggested by Hollander's (1978) research, is perhaps the best way to understand how leaders and followers affect each other (Hughes et al., 2015). Also, the confluence of components also established the reason for not making broad generalizations about the leadership process. Some scholars view research, which generalizes, considering the complexity of interactions, as problematic to the field of research (Hughes et al., 2015). In other words, leadership theory has both critical relational and contextual requirements for functionality.

In 2012, Gittell and Douglas viewed relational leadership as a process of reciprocity between members throughout the organization. The reciprocity facilities the interpenetration of expertise, which leads to greater understanding and achievement. In this way relational leadership rests on two skills empowering others and being empowered. Relational orientation provides a different direction of research, opposite or distinct from task-oriented research. The difference is that relational leaders are not as goal directed and instead they are more interested in the connection between leaders and followers (Northouse, 2021). Moreover, relational leaders are concerned with the well-being of followers and the atmosphere. That is, they are focused on the human aspects of leadership, valuing followers' uniqueness and personal needs. Servant leadership, transformative leadership, inclusive leadership, and complexity leadership consider the depth of relational leadership research.

Servant Leaders

The practice of servant leadership centers on the idea that the goal of the leader is to serve. In this way the servant leaders share power by putting the needs of members within an

organization first. According to the founder Robert K. Greenleaf (1977), the servant leader focuses on ensuring those served become healthier, wiser, freer, and autonomous. Greenleaf viewed servant leadership as a natural quality. For example, he offered that "natural servants are training to see the world as it is and are listening to prophetic voices that are speaking . . . challenging the pervasive injustice with greater force" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 9). This establishment of servant leadership suggests specific cognitive awareness and associated time for formation.

Scholars have situated servant leadership in the framework of transformational leadership based on the variables found in literature (Farling et al., 1999). Variables such as vision, influence, credibility, trust, and service provide a foundation for literature on servant leadership (Farling et al., 1999). Moreover, ideas on servant leadership are deeply philosophical and associated with figures such as Jesus Christ to describe the archetype of servant leadership and draw distinction from historical herculean leadership or serving followers versus leading followers (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The consensus among scholars is that servant leadership is a form of transformational leadership, working to build both the leader and follower (Farling et al., 1999).

Transformative Leaders

The concept of transformational leadership centers on the idea that a leader works with teams or followers to identify requirements for change, establishes a vision for change, and then guides followers through the process. Along the way, the transformational leader shifts the thinking among group members beyond individual and collective capability limitations. The idea of transformational leadership arrived as part of describing the dichotomy between leaders. Burns' (1978) analysis of political leaders laid the foundation by describing leaders as

transactional (exchanging tangible rewards for work and loyalty) and transformational (focused on followers' intrinsic needs and achieving specific outcomes). Bass (1996) furthered the idea of transformational leadership, in tandem with transactional leadership, arguing a continuum existed, and that leaders needed to borrow from both. While transactional leadership involves trading rewards for work, transformational leadership requires deeper personal qualities to develop visions for change to elevate people from lower to higher levels (Hay, 2006). This makes transformational leadership important during times of uncertainty and tension.

Inclusive Leaders

Ryan (2007) linked inclusive leadership to critical theorists who reject individual and hierarchal views of leadership as an acknowledgment of broader historical social injustice. Critical theorists took issue with vertical divisions of labor for power and control, while also rejecting the heroic view of leadership (Foster, 1989). Therefore, ideas of collaborative, reciprocal, and horizontal relationships developed from this criticism leading to contemporary concepts of inclusion leadership (Ryan, 2007). Diversity does not automatically create an inclusive climate. A moderator in inclusive leadership is needed for establishing a climate in which organizational members feel welcomed and valued.

Ashikali et al. (2021) studied public sector teams in the Dutch Republic and confirmed the impact of inclusive leadership on the relationship between diverse organizations and inclusive climates. A survey of 293 team members and 45 teams revealed that inclusive leadership positively moderates the relationship between diversity and inclusive climates (Ashikali et al., 2021). Thus, the expectation of inclusive climates based on diverse teams, despite intense sociopolitical polarization, represents flawed thinking. The inclusive behaviors

associated with leading diverse teams should be explored given the empirical evidence of effectiveness in creating perceptions of belonging, uniqueness, and value among members.

A review of inclusive leadership research provides a consolidated conceptual framework and summary of measured variables for future empirical research. Korkmaz et al. (2022) developed an inclusive leadership framework following a systematic literature review, which incorporated 50 themes and 10 categories across four dimensions. The four dimensions of inclusive leadership outline the operational approach for creating an inclusive climate. They are fostering employees' uniqueness, strengthening belongingness within a team, supporting organizational efforts, and showing appreciation. The four dimensions are critical not only to creating an inclusive climate, but also to mitigating a polarized work environment and structures of control. As a moderator for the variable of perceived dysfunctional behavior at the team level, inclusive leadership theorizes an outcome of common identity at the workgroup/team level (Korkmaz et al., 2022). This outcome is critical in the context of researching leadership approaches to countering polarization in organizations.

Leading in Polarized Contexts

Research on polarization in organizations offers empirical evidence of the need for a relational approach. Javidan et al. (2023) conducted a two-phased survey of U.S. managers and professionals across multiple public and private industries to understand polarization. The researchers conducted the first phase in 2019 (pre-COVID-19), surveying 447 participants. The second phase of surveys occurred in 2020 during COVID-19 and included another 439 participants. The demographic distribution of both samples was balanced across gender, education, and political affiliation. Moreover, these managers and professionals identified their work as critical to organizational functions from innovation to human resource management.

Javidan et al. (2023) identified three important findings: 1. Membership or the association of political parties is a major source of out-group bias among managers and professionals; 2. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis increased the problem of political association out-group bias; and 3. Empathy is critical to building trust among managers and professionals with different political views. These findings led the researchers to develop three relational approach-based strategies for responding to polarized workgroups and teams. The researchers developed the Acknowledge, Respect, and Trust framework (ART) as a strategy for relational interaction among workgroup and team members.

The trust building part of the ART strategy for relational interactions is extremely vital to countering polarization and difficulties in accomplishing or achieving group goals. Javidan et al. (2023) offered that the most important behaviors of leaders are those that demonstrate trust as well as empathy and curiosity. The actions associated with these goals include deep listening and active learning to foster the airing of concerns during periods of disagreement or incompatible views on issues. Javidan et al. offered the adage, "Trust is gained in drops and lost in buckets," to describe the time and effort needed to achieve trust in the workplace in general, which should be compounded for polarization (p. 737). However, understanding the components of effective conversations offers a path towards achieving trust. Deep listening only goes so far towards building trust. Therefore, Javidan et al. prescribed the use of learning conversations to deal with polarization, which involves dialogue whereby participants ask questions about the motivations of individuals when their statements are not clear. In this way, leaders can reduce stereotypes and negative attributions by increasing understanding among workgroup and team members. Another technique is ensuring people state how they feel when statements are made to the group.

According to Javidan et al., this is accomplished by using the formula: "When you say or do X, it makes me feel Y," and then allowing the other person to respond (p. 738).

Brower et al. (2000) developed a model on relational leadership based on leader-member exchange (LMX) and interpersonal trust. The core of their research concerns interpersonal exchanges or how relationships allow for evaluation of ability, benevolence, and integrity between individuals. Their exploration and fusion of research led to several propositions for future researchers to validate the concepts of trust and reciprocity as critical conceptual components of the relational approach to leadership.

The research on leadership and trust describes leaders treating subordinates the same, which facilitates the integration of leadership theory with interpersonal trust as part of LMX (House & Aditya, 1997; Schriesheim et al., 1999; Yukl & Tracey, 1992; Brower et al., 2000). Brower et al. (2000) believed that LMX provides a foundation for understanding and testing theories on how trust develops between leaders and their subordinates. Consequently, this approach supports research on the workgroup and team setting, as well as interorganizational interactions, which is fundamental to developing policy, projects, and programs throughout the executive branch of the U.S. federal government.

Based on perceptions, the concept of reciprocity is critical to the relational process of exchange between leaders and followers (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Using research from LMX, the perception of trust develops from interpersonal exchanges in which leaders and followers evaluate the ability, benevolence, and integrity of each other (Brower et al., 2000). In turn, these perceptions determine and predict the behaviors found in LMX models. Brower et al. (2000) views this knowledge as critical to understanding relational

leadership dynamics without losing the richness and uniqueness of exchange theory or that of research on leadership and trust.

Moreover, the perceived reciprocal nature of the relationship between leader and followers determines the establishment of trust. Reciprocity is critical to LMX and trust research, which also makes the concept critical to relational leadership research. However, the meaning of reciprocity is different in LMX and trust research. In literature on LMX, researchers assert that both followers and leaders bring something of value to the exchange, which makes the two parties interrelated (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Brower et al., 2000). The interaction between the two parties develops an exchange, which builds into a relationship-based connection. This interrelatedness or relationship will reach an equilibrium, or balance, over time (Emerson, 1962; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Brower et al., 2000). In this way, the quality of the relationship is mutually perceived through balanced reciprocity.

Another critical component of the relational approach concerns the practice of responding to divisions in the workplace. Leaders consider the importance of responding and the ways in which their timely and strategic actions can impact group dynamics. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) researched the relational approach to leading and developed the idea that leaders need to be sensitive, attuned, and responsive to moments of differences. Moreover, they found that leaders also maintain a feeling of responsibility for working through differences, as was shown in their research observations with law enforcement officials. They described examples of contrasting views regarding issues in the workplace, such as security procedures, where team members had different experiences with enforcing security standards. While this may not seem like much of a conflict, consider their example of different views on asking mothers to take newborn babies out of harnesses for separate screenings (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The outcome of those searches

led to feelings of embarrassment and violation. Moreover, the contesting views and empathy will likely depend on those security officials with or without children. This type of scenario describes the nature of relational integrity or the responsiveness, consistency, and responsibility to address the differences in views towards team and organizational goals.

The concept of responsiveness enables thinking and development of ways to anticipate problems and conversations. In a study on workplace political polarization, Javidan et al. (2023) described the challenges of competing perceptions of reality and a lack of understanding between workgroup members, which require leaders to anticipate internal dialogue. Preconceived constructions of conversations to outline the differences of perspectives between groups enables leaders to maintain responsiveness to group conflict and preemptively start conversations to enable empathy towards different perspectives. Javidan et al. (2023) offered the tried-and-true method of left/right column bifurcation of ideas and views presented by Senge et al. (1994) in a seminal book on organizations, *The Fifth Discipline*. The idea is to provide a multiperspective or the "rest of the story" on the complex issues in question (Senge et al., 1994).

Collective Loci of Leadership

The collective loci of leadership include research on leaders in groups and teams with an acute focus on the leader's role in shaping outcomes (Dugan, 2017). This research includes LMX shared and team leadership. Collective leadership theories are relevant to the study of ideological polarization, as agency members with similar beliefs are likely to cluster into in-group and out-group categories. Thus, a leader may need to shift leadership interactions with different groups.

Leader-Member Exchange

Of the collective leadership research theories, leader-member exchange is perhaps the most controversial given the implications of social status among members in the organization.

LMX theory suggests that leadership is a function of followers giving leadership status and responsibility to leaders as part of a partnership rather than control (Rubenstein, 2005). The controversy stems on the acceptance of a social categorization of leadership in organizations as part of realist philosophical outlook (Dugan, 2017). However, the theory pivots on the concept of in-group and out-group membership which makes the consideration of LMX important to this research. This is because LMX creates an alignment with polarization theory whereby group members will have opposing viewpoints and naturally create an in-group and out-group categorization.

Brewer et al. (2000) integrated research on trust and LMX to create a conceptual relational model for testing how trust is developed between supervisors and subordinates. At the time, scholars were calling for models and empirical tests on the matter following the identification of gaps in the empirical literature (Whitener et al., 1998). Brewer et al. (2000) believed that measuring Leaders Trust in Subordinate (LTS) and Subordinate Trust in Leader (STL) was possible using the relational construct in the leadership context. Moreover, the authors believed the subordinates' perception of LTS would have a direct effect on STL. While not conclusive, their research enabled future scholarship on the question of relational leadership and dyadic relationships.

Shared Leadership

Pearce and Conger (2003) described shared leadership as an interactive process among individuals in groups with the purpose of leading one another to achieve group or organizational goals. They believe influence could come from any direction in a group—top down, left or right—and simultaneously. Pearce et al. (2014) offered that every human can share the responsibility of leading in all types of circumstances. Shared leadership differs from that of

team leadership in that team leadership assumes an external formal authority with different degrees of oversight (Dugan, 2017). Conversely, shared leadership positions all members for reciprocal leadership as part of a collective leadership capacity.

Relational Leadership

As discussed in Chapter One, early organizational researchers recognized the importance of relationships in leadership. However, a clear theoretical understanding of "relational leaders" was lacking. Uhl-Bien (2006) argued for the development of a formal framework, as management research often reduced the definition to individuals who "like people and thrive on relationships" (Lipman-Blumen, 1996, p. 165). While early scholars like Likert (1961) explored relationship-oriented behavioral styles, and Stogdill et al. (1962) referred to "supportive" leadership, later research emphasized the development of high-quality, trusting work relationships (Brower et al., 2000; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al., 2000). A pivotal shift occurred when Murrell (1997), Drath (2001), and Hosking (2011) began to conceptualize leadership and organizations as social constructs grounded in connections and interdependence. This marked a transition from viewing leadership as an individual attribute to understanding it as a process (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The relational perspective, therefore, focuses on people, leadership, and the relational realities constructed through these processes (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2011). This fundamental shift effectively bifurcated leadership research into two distinct approaches: the entity perspective, centered on individuals, and the relational perspective, which emphasizes the social construction of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Entity Perspective

Traditional leadership research, often categorized as relationship-based or the entity perspective, extensively examines individual perceptions, intentions, behaviors, and personalities

(Uhl-Bien, 2006). However, this approach limits the understanding of leadership by isolating it to individual attributes. Scholars like Hosking et al. (1995) operate under the assumption that organizational life is solely a product of individual actions, thereby separating the internal self from the external environment. This assumption underpins several approaches that conceptualize relationships as specific connections between individuals, or leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006). A prominent example is LMX theory, which proposes that leadership emerges from effective relationships built on incremental influence between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006). LMX theory emphasizes the dyadic relationship, or partnership, as the source of leadership influence and highlights its benefits for organizational outcomes (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Despite its organizational implications, LMX theory remains an entity perspective, as its core focus lies in individual behaviors, interactions, and characteristics (Dacher & Hosking, 1995). Essentially, the subject of inquiry remains confined to the individual's cognitive processes (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Entity perspective research also encompasses Hollander's (date?) relational theory, charismatic relationships, and the relational and collective self. Hollander's relational theory conceptualized leadership as a relational process (Hollander, 1958) centered on a two-way influence and social exchange between leaders and followers (Hollander, 1979). However, Hollander (1969) still positioned the leader as one individual among others. Furthermore, the theory's consideration of transactions or exchanges remains rooted in individual perceptions. Similarly, charismatic relationship-based leadership maintains an entity perspective due to its reliance on individual views of the leader. These social relationships between leaders and followers (Howell & Shamir, 2005; Jermier, 1993; Kark & Shamir, 2002; Klein & House, 1995; Shamir, 1991; Weierter, 1997) are framed by follower characteristics and the integration of self-

identity theory, which distinguishes between socialized and personalized charismatic relationships, thereby shaping the leader-follower dynamic. Finally, research on the relational and collective self, another entity perspective, focuses on the social self-concept, specifically how individuals define themselves in relation to others (Anderson & Chen, 2002; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lord et al., 1999). The relational self pertains to specific contexts and relationships, while the collective-self concerns identification with a group, organization, or social category (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Further entity perspective research, pushing conceptual boundaries, includes social networks and postindustrial leadership. Balkundi and Kilduff (2005) integrated social network theory with leadership, emphasizing the role of networks in individual leader actions, such as supporting or negotiating, even when formal supervisory positions are absent. According to Balkundi and Kilduff, network theory rests on four core principles: 1) the significance of relations between organizational actors; 2) actors' embeddedness within social fields; 3) the social utility of network connections (social capital); and 4) the structural patterns of social life (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006). Despite its multilevel perspective, encompassing individual actors and broader organizational structures, Uhl-Bien (2006) classifies social network theory as an entity perspective. This classification stems from its association with the "cognitions in the mind of the leader" (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005, p. 944). Uhl-Bien, however, acknowledges that certain language used by Balkundi and Kilduff, such as viewing society as a "system of objects" (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005), hints at a relational perspective. Nonetheless, the primary focus remains on interactions, and social network theory research often confines itself to descriptions of communication patterns and network taxonomies (e.g., friendship, advice) rather than exploring the evolution of interpersonal connections (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Entity perspectives on relational leadership emphasize influence as stemming from individual perceptions, cognition, attributes, and behaviors. In contrast, relational perspectives posit that social reality and influence are embedded within the context of relationships (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006) (see table 2). This means individual thoughts and assumptions are understood as part of ongoing conversations and relationships (Holmberg, 2000). Uhl-Bien (2006) argued that relational perspectives diverge from traditional management and organizational language, which relies on "structures" and "entities" (p. 661). Instead, relational perspectives describe "elaborate relational networks of changing persons through time and space, in a complex interplay of effects between individual organizational members . . . power is not concentrated within certain individuals, but distributed" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, pp. 661-662; Foucault, 1977). By applying this relational lens, Uhl-Bien shifted the focus of leadership theory from individuals or entities to the collective. Rather than emphasizing the "quality and type of interpersonal relationships" between individuals, relational perspectives focus on the relational "in relation to," recognizing the multiple, co-evolving, and co-constructed realities of self and other (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 662; Hosking, 2011).

Table 2: Comparison of Entity and Relational Perspectives

	Entity	Relational
Ontological assumptions	Realist (assumes an objective reality) • Views individuals in relationships as separate, independent bounded entities	Relational (assumes a social reality) • All social realities – all knowledge of self and of other people and things – are viewed as interdependent or co-dependent constructions existing and known only in relation
Approach to process	Cognitivist, constructivist • Individuals performing internal cognitive operations (separable from external social influences) to make sense of and understand how things really are	Constructionist • Person and context are interrelated social constructions made in ongoing local–cultural–historical processes
Approach to methodology	Views relating as an individual act • These acts are reduced to one-way causal relations with feedback; therefore, the basic *unit of analysis is the individual* and studies are operationalized using individual-level variables	Assumes the primacy of relations • Focuses on communication as the medium in which all social constructions of leadership are continuously created and changed
View of leadership	Emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships • Focuses primarily on leadership in conditions of already "being organized"	Emphasizes the importance of "relating" and relatedness • Considers leadership as "a process of organizing"

Note. From Uhl-Bien, 2006.

Relational Perspective

The relational perspective, rooted in social constructionism, fundamentally reframes leadership by positioning relationships as the primary unit of analysis. Scholars like Dachler and Hosking proposed that leadership is intrinsically a social process, realized through diverse communicative practices that construct multiple realities. Dachler (1992) argued for a shift in leadership research, advocating for the study of social processes over isolated elements like leader behaviors or follower motivations. This process-oriented approach redirected research inquiries toward understanding how leadership realities function within relational networks and how actions are embedded in collective sense-making (Dachler, 1992; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Similarly, Hosking (2011) asserted that relational analysis should transcend dyadic interactions or interactions between known actors. Instead, it should encompass all organizational communication, including nonverbal actions, material objects, and events (Hosking, 2011). Abell and Simons further extended this view, proposing that organizations should be conceptualized as

"an array of stories," context-dependent narratives with negotiated and renegotiated meaning and relevance (Abell & Simons, 2000, p. 161). Consequently, researchers and leaders must adopt a holistic lens, examining ongoing interactions, influence, and events to comprehend the co-constructed nature of organizational reality.

Relational leadership research underwent a significant shift with Drath (2001), who conceptualized leadership as a process of relational dialogue. This approach emphasizes the involvement of responsible individuals to enhance a system's capacity for task accomplishment. Leaders facilitate the bridging of ideas through collaboration and communication to achieve complex objectives. Drath highlights dialogue as the central component of knowledge system interaction. Conversely, Murrell (1997) defined leadership as a shared responsibility, a "social act" that drives organizational progress, involving multiple "parties" in the process (pp. 35-39). Both Drath and Murrell sought to move beyond the traditional leader-follower dyad, focusing their research on the collective, or relational, perspective. Uhl-Bien (2006) built upon these insights into the relational dynamics of leadership to develop a comprehensive framework for RLT.

Uhl-Bien (2006) initiates her discussion of RLT by asserting that leadership is omnidirectional and not role-specific. Drawing on Hunt and Dodge's (2000) social network analysis research, she illustrates the theme of engagement as a central tenet of RLT. Consequently, Uhl-Bien sought to elucidate the relational dynamics and social processes that constitute leadership and organizing. RLT, therefore, is defined as "the study of both relationships (interpersonal relationships as outcomes of or as context for interactions) and relational dynamics (social interactions, social construction) of leadership" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 667). This theory provides an overarching framework for examining relational dynamics,

specifically the generation and function of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Uhl-Bien emphasizes that leadership is not determined by position and that the focus shifts from individual leaders to relational processes. To identify relational processes as leadership, she recommends observing indicators such as "emergent coordination" (social order) and "change" (new approaches, attitudes, and goals) (p. 667). In essence, RLT represents a move towards understanding leadership as a social influence process, a concept explicitly articulated in Uhl-Bien's definition: "a social influence process through which emergent coordination and change are constructed and produced" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 668). Despite offering a clear definition, Uhl-Bien does not prescribe a singular methodological approach to RLT. Instead, she envisions it as encompassing "a variety of methods, approaches and even ontologies" for exploring relational dynamics and understanding relational outcomes in leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 668).

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) advanced RLT by framing leadership as embedded in inherently moral, everyday, relationally responsive dialogical practices. They drew upon concepts such as ethical selfhood and dialogism to emphasize the social experience of leadership. Dialogism, in this context, refers to the practice of engaging in dialogue "with people and not to them," recognizing that meaning emerges in "specific moments of responsive conversation" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1434). This approach implies that all utterances are contextualized within relationships and that shared understanding is a process of mutual engagement. Relatedly, Cunliffe and Eriksen introduced the concept of heteroglossia to address the challenges of achieving shared understanding. Heteroglossia encompasses "intersecting ideas, ways of speaking," and value judgments (p. 1436). It underscores the complexity of collaborative meaning-making and its centrality to relational leadership.

Ultimately, Cunliffe and Eriksen conceptualized leadership as "being-in-relation-to-others," a key theme in their relational leadership research (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1433). They further argued that relational leadership involves facilitating the process of "working out what is meaningful," which necessitates dialogue and polyphony (multiple voices), and recognizing the inherent moral responsibility in navigating differences (p. 1433). Additionally, they suggested that practical wisdom is crucial for relational leadership, based on their observations of federal leader experiences at the TSA.

Epistemologically, Cunliffe and Eriksen's abductive empirical research extended RLT beyond abstract concepts through applied research and practical recommendations. They proposed five key relational practices: fostering open dialogue; accepting responsibility for identifying and addressing moments of difference; creating "scenic moments" for reflection; upholding relational integrity; and cultivating heightened awareness to sense and respond in the present moment (p. 1444). These recommendations, coupled with their acknowledgment of the need for further research into how leaders' conversations and relationships illuminate the intersubjective nature of actions, provide a fertile ground for future scholarly inquiry.

RLT, with its emphasis on interaction dynamics, influence, and ethical conduct within social systems, provides a compelling lens for understanding leader experiences with ideological polarization in the NCR. This focus on interaction, rather than solely on individuals, aligns directly with the nature of ideological polarization, which inherently involves interactions between individuals and groups. Uhl-Bien's (2006) research underscores the importance of analyzing interaction patterns that perpetuate polarization, as well as examining the power dynamics and social networks (leader context) that reinforce polarized viewpoints. Similarly, Cunliffe and Eriksen's conceptualization of relational leadership, through the lenses of dialogue,

heteroglossia, and morality and their empirical findings on federal leaders' use of relationships to construct reality, further strengthen the relevance of this approach. Moreover, their explicit call for continued research on relational leadership outcomes highlights a critical gap in our current understanding. Specifically, we lack knowledge about how relationships and relational leaders navigate contexts of heightened polarization.

Career Federal Leaders

Recent literature on career federal leaders has explored employee engagement, trust, emotional intelligence, and polarization of bureaucratic systems. Understanding leader response forms the research core of each of these studies. They include leader actions in the context of relational, emotional experiences and examine the outcomes of leader interactions. Moreover, these empirical studies pertain to work practices, providing a foundation for the discrete research of career federal leader experience with and response to workgroup and team ideological polarization in federal agencies.

Rude (2013) during a 2013 study on developmental experiences found that leaders in federal organizations possessed minimal understanding of emotional intelligence. This, despite the findings from researching emotional intelligence, was linked to leader effectiveness in the context of federal leaders. Another study in 2013 on the relationship between trust and retention of federal employees found that leaders in federal organizations lacked good relationships with employees. As such, Batchelor (2013) recommended the correlation between trust and retention could be impacted by a leader's policies to improve relations. This study included over 800, federal employees, ranging from GS-5 to GS-15 and used statistical procedures to determine the relationship of trust and intent to stay in an organization. The significance of this study is that

relational leadership research in federal organizations was a latent outcome and presented as a key finding.

Grant (2019) investigated the influence of leadership behaviors on employee engagement and collaboration in a U.S. federal organization of 3,800 members. The research problem centered on the absence of directed leadership styles in federal organizations. Leveraging the lived experience of 10 participants from throughout the organization, and an exhaustive literature review, Grant located three critical themes. The first theme described collaborative leadership style for approaching teamwork and group dynamics. The second theme revealed unfair hiring practices consistent with a legacy transactional leadership style. The third theme described an engagement and commitment of organizational members because of a transformational leadership style environment. In essence, effective leadership, and subsequent performance, was the result of collaborative approaches to the leadership process.

The study of leaders' perception of paradox in U.S. federal organizations provides a pathway to the study of polarization. Diaz (2022) sampled 125 federal leaders in the NCR to understand their experiences of paradoxical tensions associated with change. Among some of the more interesting findings, Diaz found that men are more likely than women to experience paradoxical tension and that many executives retain the greatest levels of paradoxical tension. This is important as senior executives are responsible for developing policy, programs, and projects in collaboration with career federal leaders to ensure implementation.

Diaz also found that managers and workers with a paradoxical mindset were best positioned to navigate organizational barriers associated with paradoxical tensions in the work environment. This finding suggests the study of ideological polarization in federal organizations will follow the same paradigm. That is, managers will be as likely to experience ideological

polarization as part of paradoxical tensions in federal organizations, and, like the paradoxical mindset, a particular type of leadership approach for managing (navigating) polarization will be located.

In contrast to conflict between career federal leaders and political appointees, the ability to control and influence entire organizations was evident at the conclusion of the Trump administration in 2020. Wayne's (2022) research on the Biden presidency found that many of Trump's appointees refused to work with the Biden transition team based on the ideological party line of electoral denial. Trump senior appointees in the Department of Defense and the Office of Budget and Management delayed or denied meetings with a unifying effect on career federal leaders as they ignored Biden's transition team requests for critical transition information. Compounding ideological influence, Wayne (2022) offered that following the inauguration, Biden administration political appointees entered murky agency environments with Trump appointees that had "burrowed" into the career federal system to ensure future subversion. Thus, the early days of Biden's executive branch involved new agency appointees and career federal leaders trying to reverse the efforts of Trump appointees. This was done to ensure they did not violate the rules of merit-based hiring and promotions, a Clinton administration era reform aimed at building trust among career federal leaders (Wayne 2022). Put another way, career federal leaders in the executive branch faced an ideologically polarized environment, but were required to remain focused on their policy, program, and project duties to continue the federal administration for the American people.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides a theoretical and contextual foundation for the study by presenting current and relevant research across three primary areas: the distinctive environment of the NCR

federal workforce, the theoretical underpinnings of ideological polarization, and key perspectives from leadership theory. First, this chapter established the unique operational environment for career federal leaders within the NCR. Scott (2005) traced the evolution of federal workplaces from their initial concentration in the District of Columbia to their subsequent expansion into the surrounding counties and cities of Virginia and Maryland. Hanson's (date?) study further illuminated the deeply entrenched nature of the federal workforce, observing their patterns of living, working, and socializing within these specific locales. Despite their distinct educational backgrounds and compensation compared to other major metropolitan areas, these federal employees are intrinsically involved in local politics, often clustering demographically based on their residential choices. This creates a complex social and political fabric in which career federal leaders operate.

Second, the chapter delved into seminal research on polarization theory, revealing crucial linkages between social identity theory, ideology, and the manifestation of polarization. These theoretical connections are vital for understanding both the genesis of and probable experiences with ideological polarization among career federal leaders in NCR workplaces. Seminal authors such as Tajfel (1970) demonstrated the tendency of in-group members to import their social categories when engaging in group actions. Building on this, Van Dijk's (1995) research on ideology illuminated the cognitive processes involved in overtly and covertly justifying such actions, including the promotion of positive self-presentation and negative "other" presentation. Furthermore, the polarization literature offered useful frameworks for understanding ideological divisions not only in private organizations but also within specific branches of government. Gupta and Briscoe (2016; 2018) found that political activities in private organizations occur along a spectrum, with conservative CEOs, for instance, shaping structures of diffused power

and resource distribution, thereby confirming and extending Hambrick and Mason's (1984) upper echelons theory. Within federal organizations, Mentzer (2021) and Funderburke (2019) documented instances of intractable workgroups, hindered from progressing on critical congressional and national security-related defense matters due to internal divisions.

Finally, the chapter examined leadership theory, forming the foundation for understanding actions in organizational settings and linking directly to research on social identity and ideological polarization. Leadership research on groups includes theories on shared and team leadership, which are often designed to counteract in-group and out-group identification and behaviors. However, theories such as LMX adopt a more realistic approach, acknowledging that leaders are likely to adjust their interactions and accommodations based on whether individuals are perceived as in-group or out-group members. Crucially, the relational leadership research canon provides a vital counterbalance to these realist LMX findings. Approaches such as servant, transformational, complexity, and inclusive leadership are explicitly designed to dismantle organizational walls or silos within workgroups. These approaches aim to foster a deeper understanding among members, with the goal of maximizing individual growth and work performance through personal change and perspective sharing. Such frameworks offer an excellent strategy for identifying exemplary leadership behaviors in response to the challenges of workplace polarization.

Collectively, the areas of research presented in this chapter—the unique sociopolitical context of the NCR federal workforce, the theoretical mechanisms of ideological polarization, and the nuanced spectrum of leadership approaches—provide a robust foundation for this study. By understanding where career federal leaders operate, how polarization manifests and is cognitively processed, and how leadership is discussed in the context of ideological polarization,

this study is well positioned to explore and illuminate the lived experiences of federal leaders navigating and responding to ideological challenges.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research paradigm, design, and methods for the study. The chapter also outlines the characteristics of qualitative research to demonstrate the relationship to the forthcoming study. This chapter provides a detailed description of qualitative research design to delineate the strategy for proceeding with inquiries at selected research sites. Finally, this chapter provides the detailed procedures for selecting participants, collecting data, conducting data analysis, and completing a final report and measures to ensure trustworthiness. Most importantly, this chapter concludes with a discussion on protecting participants and procedures for approval through the IRB.

The study commenced in the summer of a general election year (2024), a period characterized by intense political uncertainty, with media outlets widely acknowledging the presidential race as too close to call. Both the sitting Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump, held near-equal standing in national polls. This heightened politicization, spanning from the outset of the study through the election of President-elect Trump and the concession of nominee Harris in November, consistently amplified the salience of issues discussed during participant interviews.

Analysis of pre- and post-election interview data revealed a noteworthy consistency in responses, suggesting that the core experiences of career federal leaders remained stable despite the electoral outcome. However, due to significant uncertainties surrounding how President-elect Trump's new administration would govern, particularly concerning its anticipated impact on government institutions, data collection ceased by January 20th, the day of the inauguration. This decision proved prescient, as the incoming administration indeed initiated an unprecedented wave of changes to federal government structures and personnel. Such sweeping changes, had

data collection continued, would have introduced substantial confounding variables, potentially compromising the internal validity and interpretability of the study's findings regarding the more stable, underlying experiences of ideological polarization.

Lastly, the turbulent and potentially sensitive environment for career federal leaders necessitated an additional means for safeguarding participant identity and ensuring confidentiality beyond standard anonymization practices. To that end, following thematic analysis, a composite narrative was employed for the findings section of this study. This method, which involves synthesizing details from multiple participants into a single, illustrative story, effectively protects individual identities while powerfully conveying shared experiences and complex insights (Willis, 2019).

Research Paradigm

This study concerns leader experiences of career federal leaders with workgroup and team ideological polarization in the NCR. The proliferation of ideological polarization nationally is especially evident in the NCR. Recent concern of political coercion in the federal workforce further demonstrates a need for investigating career federal leader experiences to understand how they navigate polarizing challenges. Consequently, this research sought to make explicit the experiences and perceived best practices for leading ideologically polarized workgroups and teams. Because this type of research requires the construction of different experiences and realities, the researcher assumed a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology. This type of research paradigm is best for constructing and making meaning of different realities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

All researchers make several assumptions during the research design process. Therefore, in addition to the relativist ontological assumption, another assumption concerns the nature of

knowledge, or epistemology. This qualitative study assumed knowledge is interpreted or constructed through the close examination of conversations with participants. Creswell and Poth (2016) referred to this as "getting as close as possible to the participants being studied" (p. 46). This assumption or epistemological approach is the most common type of research because, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described, "There is no single, observable reality," but multiple realities (p. 9). Qualitative researchers with an interpretive or constructivist orientation make connections with those multiple realities and construct meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The participants located in this study came from different federal organizations in the executive branch with different roles and authorities for responding to domestic, polarizing challenges despite their similar levels of leader capacity and workgroup or team authorities and contexts within the NCR, their organizational cultures, and different experiences with navigating ideology. Therefore, the researcher of this study assumed multiple realities and experiences could be constructed to make meaning for comparison with, and potentially modification of, the lens provided by the conceptual framework.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is an overarching term covering multiple interpretive techniques for describing, decoding, translating, and coming to terms with the meaning, not just the frequency, of occurring phenomena in the social world (Van Maanen, 1979). More recent definitions of the qualitative research design concern the process of understanding how individuals make meaning of a phenomenon and how they perceive their experiences and construct their conceptual environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, the research question for this study and the aims of qualitative research both align, which made a qualitative research approach appropriate. Determining how an event or situation occurs places a premium on exploring the

participants' meanings and processes based on the research of well-known qualitative researchers such as John Maxwell (2013). This revelation, after studying different methodological perspectives, further solidified the use of a qualitative approach for understanding the experiences and processes of career federal leaders in the executive branch and the NCR.

The purpose of this study was to understand the leadership experiences of career federal leaders with workgroup and team ideological polarization in the NCR. The central research questions for this study are: How do career federal leaders describe ideological polarization? And, in the context of ideological polarization, how do career federal leaders describe leadership? These research questions are qualitative in nature, seeking descriptions of unique experiences instead of measurement for generalization. This determination aligns with the original use of qualitative research when scholars used this form of inquiry to understand social phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, this study assumed participants construct reality through the interaction within their worlds, which aligns with a constructivist epistemology, as meaning is not discovered but constructed. As Merriam and Tisdell (date?) argued, researchers conducting a basic qualitative study should be looking for: 1. "How people interpret their experiences," 2. "How they construct their worlds," and 3. "What meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). In this way, the researcher can achieve the overall purpose of understanding how participants make sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The nascent topic of career federal leaders and their responses to ideological polarization provokes an entry-level or basic qualitative approach for study.

The study of career federal leaders in the context of ideologically polarized work environments falls squarely within the bounds of applied practice, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). These applied fields of practice, which include education, health, social work, counseling, and business, are concerned with understanding and addressing real-world phenomena. Public organizations, such as the federal government, are closely aligned with these fields, making research that directly informs practice highly relevant. Thus, the basic qualitative research design is optimal for understanding how career federal leaders experience polarization in their roles and how leadership functions within that challenging context.

While decades of qualitative research have been conducted, a limited consensus persists on a singular approach to qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Nevertheless, a foundational principle has remained constant: the positioning of the researcher as close to the "point of origin" as possible (Vann Maanen, 1979, p. 520; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The variations in qualitative research largely concern the multiple ways in which this close positioning is achieved and the subsequent organization of methods. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) themselves have outlined a multitude of ways scholars organize qualitative methods for consideration. For example, Tesch (1990) categorized qualitative work through 45 approaches, including designs such as case studies and discourse analysis. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) offered "multiple strategies of inquiry" (p. xi), such as ethnography, grounded theory, and participant action research. Similarly, Creswell (2013) presented "five (qualitative) approaches," including narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Despite these varied approaches, common characteristics consistently focus the qualitative research process.

Design Characteristics

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered fourteen characteristics of naturalistic (constructivist) inquiry early in the development of qualitative research design. A few key characteristics from their original postulation include natural setting, human instrument, utilization of tacit knowledge, qualitative methods, purposeful sampling, and inductive data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, the constructivist approach or qualitative research flourished in the 20th century through continuous improvement of the process for and legitimacy of encountering, synthesizing, and making sense of multiple realities. Highlighting the expansion of qualitative research, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) captured all the different ways for interpretation through four characteristics of constructivist research with some overlap. Referred to as the "nature of qualitative research," these characteristics include meaning and understanding, researcher as the primary instrument, inductive process, and rich description (Merriam &Tisdell, 2015, p. 17). Each characteristic is explored further in the coming sections as well as linkages to the study of career federal leader experiences with workgroup and team ideological polarization in the NCR.

Inductive Process

The next characteristic of qualitative research concerns the inductive process, a critical part of qualitative research design due to the absence of theory or the failure of a theory to explain phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Early proponents of qualitative or "naturalistic inquiry," Lincoln and Guba (1985) preferred the inductive process because of the high likelihood of success locating multiple realities in the data (p. 7). As a central characteristic of qualitative research, induction makes the "investigator-respondent" exchange "explicit, recognizable, and accountable" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40).

Qualitative researchers begin the inductive process with the notation of specific observations to build general patterns (Patton, 2014). This time-tested method yields such categories or dimensions for researchers to understand the phenomenon under study. The inductive process differs from the deductive approach, which requires the identification of variables and a hypothesis statement prior to data collection (Patton, 2014). Ultimately, the inductive process offers a tool for learning from the field, which supports the goal of seeking to learn about the experiences of career federal leader experiences with ideological polarization. However, the deductive process was also incorporated into the study with data scoping using Cunliffe and Eriksen's 2011 work on relational leadership.

Researcher as Primary Instrument

Another significant characteristic of qualitative research is the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data collection. As Merriam and Tisdell (date?) argued, the researcher as the primary instrument is significant as the goal is to understand, and humans are best positioned for this. That is, responding and adapting to the setting, observing both nonverbal and verbal cues from participants, and constructing a summary for those participants to review and provide feedback on for additional accuracy. Despite 21st century advances in technology, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) position still holds. They argued it is impossible for a nonhuman data-gathering instrument to "encompass and adjust to the variety of realities" present during interactions. Only humans are still solely responsible for the "grasping and evaluating" of meaning without intrusion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40).

The researcher as instrument characteristic of qualitative research is not without challenges, especially those from scientific research orientations. As a result, Patton (2016) suggested that qualitative researchers "carefully reflect on and deal with, and report potential

sources of bias and error" (p. 113). This awareness serves as a function of "sharpening the instrument" (Brown, 1996, p. 42). Moreover, the systematic process of data collection, elective rigorous training, use of multiple data sources, and triangulation are all mitigation measures for keeping the human instrument sharp (Patton, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that qualitative researchers focus on disclosing biases instead of trying to eliminate them and clarify how personal interests may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data.

My personal experience as a government official and a military commissioned officer for almost three decades significantly informs this study in at least three key ways, embodying the principle of reflexivity in qualitative research. First, I possess extensive professional experience working within government agencies in the NCR. While the majority of my military career has been within the Department of Defense, I have actively collaborated with various agencies through interagency policy planning committees. These forums included policy and program federal leaders from departments such as State, Treasury, Justice, Commerce, Homeland Security, and Energy, among others. My duties necessitated collaboration on matters of national security and, where appropriate, support for domestic issues. Despite my primary authorities as a military officer being focused on overseas duty, my work in the NCR regularly involved assisting in administrative and logistical support for agencies addressing domestic concerns. This hands-on experience provides an invaluable, internal perspective on the operational realities and interagency dynamics within the federal government in the NCR.

Second, I was physically present and working as a military officer in the NCR during the approximately three hundred days of civil unrest, encompassing the COVID-19 restrictions, Black Lives Matter protests, and the January 6th riot at the U.S. Capitol Building. During these tumultuous events, the individuals I interacted with expressed vastly divergent views on the

issues, problems, and even the fundamental facts of what was unfolding. The deluge of information regarding the COVID-19 virus, including numerous conspiracy theories, fueled chaos in the early days of restrictions and the shift to virtual work environments. Everyone seemed to have different sources, contacts, and perspectives on the issues. The stark challenge posed by conflicting world views within and surrounding government became increasingly apparent by the time of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent protests in the NCR. For instance, in the immediate days following the 2020 election, leaders within the Department of Defense had no more clarity than the general public regarding the presidential election outcome. The riot on January 6th at the U.S. Capitol Building served as a visceral representation of the electoral chaos, and, crucially, for my perspective, statistics indicate that approximately one in three individuals present that day were military veterans. In fact, the only rioter killed that day was a retired Air Force veteran. Observing the riot and its aftermath on screens in the basement of the Pentagon evoked flashbacks of my time in war zones, passing through military checkpoints lining the George Washington Parkway.

The level of confusion and the potential for military influence were so concerning to department leaders that the then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued an unprecedented, jointly signed memorandum with all senior military leaders, unequivocally stating that Joseph R. Biden had indeed won the election. This singular action profoundly shapes my understanding of the experiences of those participating in this study. If seasoned military and national security professionals at the Pentagon were impacted by such turmoil, it is highly probable that civilian career federal leaders shared a similar disposition, making their experiences with polarization a critical area of inquiry. My lived experience therefore offers a unique lens through which to interpret and contextualize the participants' narratives.

Rich Description

Lastly, perhaps the most crucial characteristic of qualitative research is the rich description on the phenomena of study, which contrasts with other products focused on numbers. In qualitative work, words and pictures are used to display information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An early goal in qualitative research involved the use of rich description to solve limitations observed in quantitative data and the inherent process of verification. Glaser and Strauss (1967) propounded the possibilities and advantages of qualitative research based on the "richness" of their experiences in their work (p. 182).

Participant interviews provide the most significant source of this rich description in qualitative research, but other forms of data collection are also helpful. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered multiple reasons for qualitative researchers to include data from "non-human" sources (p. 277). The first reason is cost. Documents and records at research sites offer a low-cost (and time saving) window into the participant's world. Second, the use of documents and records offer stable and accurate reflections of the research site. Third, and most importantly, Lincoln and Guba argued that documents and records are a source for increasing richness because they include the "natural language" of the research site (p. 277). Thus, the combination of quotes from documents, interviews, field notes, and recordings will be included in this study to provide a rich description of career federal leader experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To summarize, the interpretivist or constructivist qualitative research paradigm offers an appropriate approach for the study of career federal leader experience with ideologically polarized workgroups and teams in the NCR. The paradigm allows for the existence of multiple truths interpreted by participants for future research on the broader application to the larger

population. The social constructivist research orientation is also appropriate because it supports the proposed conceptual framework for relational approaches to leadership. Multiple concepts in the proposed framework such as reciprocity (Brower & Schoorman, 2000), trust and empathy (Javidan et al., 2023) hinge on interpretive and constructivist approaches for a full understanding.

Research Methodology

Sociologists such as Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss wrote about their methods for building theory from inductive analysis of participant experiences in 1967, offering the earliest theoretical framework for conducting qualitative research. Egon Guba (1978) further defined qualitative research as naturalistic and taking place in the real world instead of a laboratory. This naturalistic approach avoids manipulating the environment or participants, and findings are not predetermined (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Today, these general characteristics of qualitative research have held steady, influencing disciplines outside sociology such as education, health, and social work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interpretive (Constructivist) Approach

This qualitative study will take an interpretive approach, which is the most common for applied fields of practice such as education administration, health, social work, counseling, and business (Merriam & Tisdell. 2018). As described earlier, the main characteristic of qualitative research concerns the individual construction of reality through their interactions with their social worlds. Merriam and Tisdell (2018) offered that constructivism underlies the basic qualitative study, with the researcher seeking to understand the meaning of the phenomenon of the individuals through a construction of meaning and not through discovery. Crotty (1998) believed that meaning is not discovered, but "constructed by humans as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (pp. 42-43). The basic qualitative design, then, seeks to determine

three things: 1. How people interpret their experiences; 2. How people construct their worlds; and 3. What meaning people attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2018). These aims enable the overall purpose of understanding how individuals make sense of their lives and experiences.

With a basic qualitative research design in mind, the study allowed selected participants to describe their experiences with ideological polarization in the context of workgroups and teams in the NCR. Research on workplace polarization encompasses private and public sectors, and recent concerns for political coercion have led to several questions on the topic in federal employee surveys. The basic interpretive design provided career federal employee leaders with the ability to describe their experiences in workgroups and teams throughout the executive branch of the federal government. These descriptions highlighted how career federal leaders navigated their respective contexts, offering insight on how they experienced leadership.

Descriptions of career federal leader experiences emerged during the study as anticipated considering qualitative studies are descriptive in nature with a focus on illustrating the initial component of qualitative research. This type of effect and approach was different from other qualitative designs which seek to establish theory first or an overall structure of experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given the limited research on career federal employee leaders, early outcomes of the study indicated the qualitative position would ensure overall research aims are achieved.

Sample Selection

Purposeful Sampling

This qualitative study used a purposeful sampling technique or nonprobability method. This is because the goal is not to find out how much or how often something occurs as Merriam

and Tisdell (2015) argued, which means a probabilistic sampling is not needed or proper for qualitative inquiries. The advantages of random sampling depend on the population size. A reasonably large size makes variation unlikely (Maxwell, 2013). Light et al. (1990) offered that with a limited number of sites it is better to use purposeful sampling instead of relying on "idiosyncrasies of chance" (p. 53). This study had precisely the same considerations with a small number of agencies as research sites. However, in the past, qualitative researchers have used probability sampling in making decisions. Maxwell (2013) offered an example of a qualitative researcher's use of random sampling for decision-making citing Starnes' (1990) use of a stratified random sample of staff at a daycare center to narrow down volunteers for interviews and avoid the perception of favoritism. The Starnes (1990) research example, while clever, is an exception to the norm.

"Snowball" Sampling

The snowball sampling technique for interviewing research participants offered the best approach for this study considering the acute nature of experiencing ideologically polarization as a career federal leader. Patton (2016) argued that exploration qualitative research such as this study requires the building of a sample during fieldwork, which means that "one case will lead to another, in sequence, as the inquiry unfolds" (p. 408). The "snowball" effect occurs through the multiplication of referrals at each step (Patton, 2016, p. 451). The easiest way to doing this according to Patton (2016) is by asking participants for suggestions of others with similar experiences. Considering that snowball sampling is the most common form of purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), this study incorporated the technique starting with the researcher's professional contacts at the identified research sites. The snowball sampling technique was used in two ways. First, the technique maximized the participant population

through personal contacts throughout the federal organizations in the NCR during the interview process. Second the initial recruitment letter outlined the referral process to increase the number of participants before interviews were conducted. In this way, the purposeful sampling narrowed the data collection search to those participants most likely to experience the phenomenon and the referral or snowball process ensures continuous connection to relevant potential participants for the study.

Sites of Research

In addition to advocating for nonprobability sampling, Creswell (2016) argued that an important step in selecting sample sites was figuring out which places the researcher is most likely to gain access and establish a rapport for the collection of good data. This recommendation is appropriate for a study on career federal leaders serving at agencies in the NCR. In general, by design, placement and access to individuals working in federal agencies is highly restricted. However, the researcher's background and status as a federal employee at the Department of Defense mitigated the normal restrictions against other researchers conducting a similar study.

Qualitative scholars have argued for the quality of sites rather than the quantity of sites as a central component of researching experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). Consequently, the sites selected should be those that directly inform the purpose of the study. The context of this study centered on career federal leader experiences with workgroup and team ideological polarization in the NCR given the proliferation in the recent years. Heretofore, the problem of intense polarization mainly involved the legislative branch of government. However, the intensification of differences over domestic issues guided this study to other branches of government such as the executive branch and the domestic policy council organizations responsible for leading processes for policy, programs, and projects in responses.

Thus, the sites of research for this study included the executive branch agencies in the NCR. Within the executive branch, there are several councils focused on executive branch policy, which codified the bounding process further. Dating back to the Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, the White House was home to domestic policy staff run by senior-level aids for the purpose of organizing staff and developing domestic policy (Exec. Order No. 12859, 1993). President Richard Nixon first established the Office of Policy Development in 1970, which initially had oversight of executive branch economic and domestic policy, but, in 1993, President William Clinton split the office into separate councils through executive order (Exec. Order No. 12859, 1993).

Today, as intended through executive order, the Domestic Policy Council (DPC) is a collection of executive branch agencies responsible for development and implementation of the president's policy agenda, which is typically aligned with the most divisive and ideologically polarized issues outlined during the campaign and election process (see Table 3). Consequently, these agencies and their career federal leaders are most likely to encounter ideological polarization in the policy, program, and project development process.

Table 3: Domestic Policy Council

Domestic Policy Council
President, who shall serve as a Chairman of the Council
Vice President
Secretary of Health and Human Services
Attorney General
Secretary of Labor
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Secretary of the Interior
Secretary of Education
Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
Secretary of Agriculture
Secretary of Transportation
Secretary of Commerce
Secretary of Energy

Secretary of the Treasury Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers Director of the Office of Management and Budget Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of National Service Senior Advisor to the President for Policy Development Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy

Note. Author original.

The DPC can meet with or without the president through an assistant to the president for domestic policy and has the following four functions according to the 1993 executive order: 1. Coordinate the domestic policymaking process, 2. Coordinate domestic policy advice to the president, 3. Ensure that domestic policy decisions and programs are consistent with the president's stated goals and ensure that those goals are being effectively pursued, and 4. Monitor implementation of the president's domestic policy agenda. All executive branch agencies must coordinate domestic policy through the council regardless of representation at the council. This study, therefore, may include executive branch agencies not listed in the executive order. The 1993 executive order is explicit in stating that all executive departments and agencies must cooperate with the council in providing aid, information, and advice to the council "to the extent permitted by law" (Exec. Order No. 12859, 1993, p. 2).

Selecting sites for a purposeful sample first involves the establishment of criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). LeCompte and Schensul (2010) referred to this as criterion-based selection, which involves deciding on the attributes of the site and participants. The attributes or criterion-based selection requirements for the federal agency study sites consisted of three characteristics. The federal agencies must be: 1. within the executive branch of government, 2. part of the DPC, and 3. supporting the Inflation Reduction Act. As described in Chapter 1, the

president typically directs his cabinet secretaries and appointed leaders to address domestic issues, which supports justification for the first and second criterion-based selection requirements for study sites. The third selection criterion integrates a recent policy example as part of the purposeful sample.

A recent Pew research report revealed the most polarizing issues in the U.S. This report provides a start point for initial research sites within the executive branch based on the DPC delegation of responsibility to the cabinet secretaries and career federal leaders at those agencies to develop policies, programs, and projects responding to top public issues. The Pew report is based on the American Trends Panel, a national representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults created by the Pew Research Center. Data drawn for the 2023 report was collected from June 4th to June 11th, 2023. A total of 5,115 panelists responded out of 5,865 who were sampled, for a response rate of 87 percent (Kochhar, 2023). The sampling error for the report is plus or minus 1.7 percentage points.

The report found that top concerns among Americans include inflation, gun violence, healthcare costs and inflation. However, respondents with more conservative viewed those same problems significantly different than their more liberal counterparts. For example, those with more conservative views are more than twice as likely as their liberal counterparts to say that illegal immigration is a very big problem in the country or seventy percent versus twenty-five percent (Pew Research, 2023). Another example is that respondents with more liberal views are more than four times as likely as their conservative counterparts to say that climate change is a very big problem in the country or sixty-four percent versus fourteen percent respectively (Pew Research, 2023). This report suggests that the executive branch organizations where career federal leaders are most likely encountering ideological polarization in workgroups and teams

developing policies, programs, and projects are likely at the Department of Homeland Security and Environmental Protection Agency. Other sharp contrasts on the nation's top issues include gun violence, inflation, and the cost of healthcare. Thus, agencies such as the Department of Treasury and Health and Human Services are also among the initial sites of inquiry for this study.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) is a recent example of an executive branch policy initiative orchestrated through the DPC in response to domestic issues. The passage of the act has led to agencies developing programs and projects directed at solving domestic issues such as inflation, healthcare, and climate change (Pew Research, 2023). However, there is a partisan divide on the importance of those issues. For example, a recent Pew research report found that Democrats and Democratic leaning people are four times as likely to say that climate change is a big problem in the country than their Republican and Republican leaning counterparts, which is about the same for the affordability of healthcare (Pew Research, 2023). Consequently, career federal leaders at the research sites responsible for climate change and healthcare cost reduction programs and projects as part of the IRA are most likely to encounter ideological polarization. These federal agencies include the Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Treasury.

Participant Selection

Narrowing the sample from research site to participant represents the next level of selection criteria. The career federal leaders were at their agencies for the last five years or since 2019. The agency time requirement ensured that each participant could describe current experiences with polarization as well as experiences across multiple presidential administrations for a comparison. Next, participants were rated (compensated) on the GS scale for civil service

employment (or agency equivalent), GS-13 to GS-15, and were not a political appointee (see Table 4).

Table 4: General Schedule Levels and Corporate Equivalent

Federal General Schedule (GS) level	Common Federal Title (Example)	Corporate/Non-Federal Equivalent
GS-15	Senior Program Manager, Division Chief, Senior Executive Service (SES) equivalent	Chief Operating Officer (COO), Vice President, Senior Director
GS-14	Program Manager, Team Lead, Branch Chief	Director, Senior Manager, Head of Department
GS-13	Senior Analyst, Project Lead, Section Chief	Manager, Mid-level Director, Senior Individual Contributor
GS-11/12	General Analyst, Specialist	Team Lead, Mid-level Specialist

Note. Author original.

The range or levels of civil service ratings were selected to ensure participants had the appropriate level of responsibility, experience, and expertise to lead workgroups and teams through policymaking, program, and project development. Finally, but most importantly, the participant had to have leadership experience. In summary, the participant selection criteria included the following:

1. Must be a nonpolitical career federal employee
2. Must be rated GS-13 through GS-15 (or agency equivalent)
3. Must have experience leading

The appropriate sample size for a qualitative study continues to cause debate among researchers. However, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Patton (2002) have written extensively on the topic, arguing on the associated ambiguity of the ideal sample size for qualitative studies. Thus, emergence and flexibility of the sample represent the characteristics of the basic qualitative designs. The logic and power of purposeful sampling comes from the ability to select information-rich cases for in-depth study. Patton (2002) noted this numerical power differences

between quantitative and qualitative research. While sample size and probability-based random sampling in quantitative research is designed to prevent bias for generalizing from a sample to the population, in qualitative research study small purposeful information-rich cases yield insights for acute problems.

Patton (2002) provided an example for evaluating the effectiveness of a program for lower socioeconomic groups where researchers would learn more from a smaller number of selected families than a standardized large, statistically representative sample of the entire program considering the research goal in this scenario. Thus, a small number of career federal leaders from the executive branch agencies, purposefully selected from organizations responding to the nations polarizing issues is likely to yield extensive information on experiences and practices per the research agenda.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were initially recruited using the researchers' professional network based on two decades of working for the Department of Defense. Moreover, recruitment was also done through agency point of contact listings on official government websites and through asking professional connections to distribute letters to recruit participants. These individuals were asked to focus their contact with participants at executive branch agencies responsible for policy, programs, and projects handling polarizing issues.

Data Collection

Qualitative research, and the basic interpretive design, permits numerous ways to collect data for understanding participant experience. The prospect of flexibility best supports the study of a nascent topic such as career federal leaders and ideologically polarized workgroups and teams in the NCR. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offered that qualitative data is that which is

conveyed through words and includes participant quotes, descriptions, and observations or expressions found in documents. This study made use of the multiple methods of data collection to provide enough detail for think descriptions and triangulation, a critical part of internal validity and reliability.

Participant Interviews

In-depth interviews form the core of data collection for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As mentioned earlier, qualitative researchers put a premium on text derived from participant descriptions during interviews seeking to convey a lived experience. As a result, in-depth interviews, as part of the basic interpretive design, are needed to capture the experiences of career federal leaders with ideologically polarized workgroups and teams. The most common form of interview occurs between two people or a "person-to-person encounter" which includes the process of one person gaining information from another (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). Interviews could also occur in group format, but in this study of career federal leaders, a more personal connection with each participant is needed to ensure a full understanding of a "special kind of information" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). Finally, the purpose of interviewing, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, is "to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 108). Patton (2002) offered the reasons for the process more explicitly arguing that researchers have the task of entering someone else's world that we cannot directly observe and ask questions about points in the past to attach meaning. This was a critical challenge for this research, but there were many polarization cues still present for leaders to reflect on given the increasing polarization in the federal government.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview structure refers to type and amount of control over the call and response activities between the interviewer and interviewee. The typology of interview structures includes unstructured, semi-structured, and structured (Fontana & Fey 2003; Brinkman, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unstructured interviews allow the greatest depth for open-ended response, but this is best for ethnographic studies, and thus when researchers have an extensive amount of time (Fontana & Frey, 1994). On the other end of the continuum, structured interviews offer the most control over call and response with very carefully crafted questions, limited response categories, and the interviewer controlling the pace (Fontana & Frey, 1994). This type of structure is highly restrictive and limits the variation of the participants and thus best for investigating specific events or phenomenology researchers. The middle ground of interview structures is typified as semi-structured offering some control for the interviewer, but not so much control that it prevents the interviewee from variation as memory recall activates during the interview process. In this way, the researcher has the greatest chance of achieving a knowledge producing dialogue, which is why this type of interviewing is the most widespread in social sciences (Brinkman, 2011).

A semi-structured interview protocol was used at the start of each participant interview. Creswell and Creswell (2017) offered that interviewers need to have a well-developed plan for documenting everything and that all materials, questions, format, length and style of engaging participants remain the same throughout the data collection process. The protocol was no more that two pages in length and contained spaces between questions for the interviewer to write notes and quotes. Major components of the interview protocol included basic information about the interview: an introduction or ice breaker, interview questions with probes, and closing

instructions (Creswell & Baez, 2020).

The opening section of the protocol was a highly structured call and response to ensure the interviewer captures the demographic information about the participant to include educational and professional background and social aspects of their experiences. During the research question section, Patton (2002) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested allowing the participants to guide the conversation may produce different types and volumes of information. Consequently, the interviewer should be aware of this challenge and maintain control using the questions to keep the discussion on track.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) recommend the total number of questions range between 5 and 10. Moreover, they also recommend content questions include the research subquestions but worded in a friendly manner to the participant. In this way, the interviewer can systematically dissect the central phenomenon, engaging the participant about different aspects (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Content questions should also have reminders to the interviewer to press for additional information where needed. These "probes" are designed to ensure the interviewer gets more from each participant response Creswell & Creswell 2017, p. 125). For example, the interview could embed the probes "tell me more" or "could you explain your response in more detail?" alongside the interview questions.

The closing section of the interviews included structured comments thanking the participant and reassuring them of the confidentiality of the study. Creswell (2017) recommended asking if the participant will be available for a follow-up discussion to clarify any points. This participant follow-up process is important for this study as part of the process for coding and analysis includes participant data verification. Finally, the was a good time to ask if the participant has another person they recommend contacting to know more about the topic

(Creswell, 2017).

Data Management

The focus on detailed and diligent data management throughout this study increased success during analysis and, most importantly, safeguarded participant confidentially. The data was secured using password protection and stored on cloud software for secure multidevice usage. All written notes taken during interviews of participant information were de-identified and serialized for tracking and entered in a Microsoft Excel sheet logging system on the cloud storage. Finally, a backup filing system of password secure local files on a computer prevents the loss of data should the cloud files become lost.

Data Analysis

Patton (2016) argued that qualitative analysis is the process of transforming data into findings, for which no formula or "recipe" exists, only guidance (p. 761). This means that direction will be offered for this study, but the "destination," as Patton (2016) says, will be unique and known only to the researcher when arrived at (p. 761). Data analysis begins during the data management process for some researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), but officially when saturation occurs. Guba (1985) defined saturation as the demonstration of redundant emergence of regularities or "feeling of integration" during the data collection process (p. 265). The termination of data collection normally follows this logic and discontinues when no new information emerges from sampled units (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At that point, the process of analysis and interpretation begins using a thematic analysis technique to answer the research questions for this study. In this study, data analysis was ongoing from the beginning.

Thematic Analysis

Boyatzis (1998) offered that thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative

information, which requires developing explicit "codes" for creating lists of themes, complex models of themes, indicators, and qualifications (p. vii). Subsequently, themes, according to Boyatzis, are patterns found in the information that describes and organizes observations and interpretations of phenomenon. Themes may come from the raw data inductively or drawn deductively from theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998). Finally, many codes compiled and integrated from a study are referred to as a "codebook" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). This study will follow Boyatzis' (1998) guidance and other researchers (Lester et al., 2020) for conducting thematic analysis considering their detailed descriptions and examples of thematic analysis in action.

Researchers use thematic analysis for grounded theory, which causes some confusion with those looking to understand the qualitative methodologies. Cho and Lee (2014) clarified that grounded theory uses primarily an inductive approach to the analysis of data, the qualitative content analysis, or basic interpretive qualitative study design, and has flexibility for both inductive and deductive code and category development. This means the researcher has the ability to incorporate preconceived codes from prior relevant research or a broader picture (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Cavanagh, 1997; Kondracki et al., 2002). Conversely, the ability to use an inductive approach enables the use of explicit and latent coding to address underlying meanings as Cho and Lee (2014) describe as part of their recommended strategy for studying phenomenon and situations that are understudied.

Thematic analysis is useful for this study as it aligns with the characteristics of a basic qualitative inquiry. As Lester et al. (2020) argued that thematic analysis offers an entry-level form of interpretation, serving as a "foundation for eventually making sense of other, more specialized forms of analysis" (p. 97). Moreover, Lester et al. described thematic analysis as a

starting point for learning and doing rigorous qualitative research because it offers "theoretical flexibility" across disciplines, utility for a range of research questions, and various kinds of data and data sizes (p. 98). In other words, thematic analysis serves as a basic, common system, appropriate for the nascent topic of this study and the career federal leader unit of analysis.

Because the process of coding and sorting data is continuous, the qualitative data analysis process is best described as iterative. Lester et al. (2020) argued the process is best viewed in phases, which have some overlap and tends to become "messy" (p. 98). Researchers must therefore build proficiency at structuring and making meaningful code. Boyatzis (1998) provides an example of the process for capturing thematic codes, and argued that, in addition to transparency, "high interrater reliability and validity" also occurs when done well (p. 31). According to Boyatzis, good thematic code has five elements: 1. Label (name); 2. Definition (characteristic or issue); 3. Description of indicators (how to flag the theme); 4. Description of qualifications or exclusions (what the theme is not); and 5. Examples, positive and negative (eliminates confusion when looking for the theme). Overall, the goal is to capture the richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998).

Analytic Procedures

As mentioned earlier, conducting thematic analysis is best approached through phases. Lester et al. (2020) borrowed from Lochmiller and Lester (2017) to create seven phases for completing thematic analysis with the aim of producing broad statements to reflect an overall understanding of the data in response to the research questions. These phases include: 1. Preparing and organizing data; 2. Transcribing data; 3. Becoming familiar with the data corpus; 4. Memoing the data; 5. Coding the data; 6. Producing categories and themes for underlying coded passages; and 7. Making the analysis transparent (see Table 5). Each phase of the thematic

analysis process contains imbedded steps to ensure key actions are taken by the researcher. Phase one was the most important, as it set the foundation for thoughtful and detailed analysis of all the data collected during the study.

Table 5: Thematic Analysis Procedures

Phase	Steps
1. Preparing and organizing data	1. Gather all audio or video recorded files in one location. 2. Convert all observational notes to electronic format (MS Word documents) and scanning documents. 3. Ensure use of structured naming protocol. 4. Create master data catalogue listing each data source, storage location, and date of collection.
2. Transcribing data	1. Download transcripts from data sources such as Microsoft Teams, Webex, Zoom or Phone recording and transcribing devices.
3. Becoming familiar with the data corpus	1. Conduct and initial analysis of data. 2. Take notes of the ideas or experiences. 3. Chronicle early reactions such as limitations or gaps.
4. Memoing the data	1. Generate memos describing reflections about the data. 2. Document any emergent interpretations.
5. Coding the data	1. Assign descriptive codes to the entire data set. 2. Return to the beginning of the data set and assign higher levels of inference codes connecting participants statements, experiences, and reflections. 3. Return to the beginning of the data set and make explicit connections to the study's conceptual and/or theoretical ideas.
6. Producing categories and themes for underlying coded passage	1. Aggregate categories from individual codes related analytically or conceptually. 2. Assign statements to the categories or theme name descriptive of the content and relationship. 3. Check alignment with conceptual or analytical goals of the study and responsiveness to study research questions.
7. Making the analysis transparent	1. Create a map of the analytic process to show movement from codes to categories to themes. 2. Select a few representative segments from the data set for an audit trail or delineating connection between data sources, codes, categories, and themes.

Note. Modified from Lester et al. (2020)

Phase One

Phase one involves organizing the hours of interview data and notes from participants during the study into a single location. While simple, this phase required the conversion of some

data such as handwritten notes and downloading of transcripts from audio and visual programs used during data collection. As mentioned earlier, this study used two methods for recording participant interviews: video teleconference and personal recording devices. Each had different methods for transferring the transcriptions. However, all transcripts were moved to a central location. This phase also required the development of a file structuring system for organizing data. A simple method for this process is giving each participant a code in place of their names and labeling transcripts, notes, and files with their assigned codes. Lastly, this phase will require the creation of a master data catalogue for listing each data source, storage location, and date of collection.

Phase Two

Phase two is a continuation of phase one considering it serves a function of preparation. During this phase all audio and video data was transcribed for further analysis. Lester et al. (2020) noted there are several ways to create transcripts, which include multimodal, gisted, and verbatim. The type of transcripts typically aligns with the methodology and purpose of the study (Lester et al., 2020). For the thematic analysis process (used in this study) verbatim transcripts are most common because they serve as an accurate record of the conversation (Lester et al., 2020). Consequently, all transcripts for this study were extracted verbatim. This process was relatively simple given the transcribing function built into the video teleconference and audio recording software. During this phase all names on transcripts were removed and replaced with numeral codes for de-identification.

Phase Three

Phase three required the researcher become familiar with the data once organized, centrally located, and transcribed. Lester et al. (2020) offered that researchers should think of

this phase as “light or initial analysis” for the purpose of noting ideas and experiences described by the participants. In effect, this is an early account of the data and critical for later discovery after going through all the data. During this phase, researchers are inspired to collect additional data if feasible or note gaps for further research (Lester et al., 2020). This phase marked a decision point for returning to participants for clarifying points upon determining missed opportunities during the interview process.

Phase Four

During phase four, the researcher created memos to describe their initial thoughts about the data. Clarke (2005) refers to this process as a “conversation with ourselves about the data” (p. 202). These memos were critical as they captured the locations in the data of analytic importance (Lester et al., 2020). The goal of those memos was to capture early interpretations and reflections as snapshots or markers for returning to later in the analysis process. Constructing electronic memos and linking them directly to the primary data source was the best approach during this phase, as later recall locates both the source and researcher’s early thoughts during analysis.

Phase Five

Phase five was the most critical and time-consuming segment of the analysis, demanding multiple coding cycles and the establishment of code associations necessary for later conceptual work (Lester et al., 2020). This phase began with first-cycle coding, which Saldana (2013) refers to as eclectic coding, an appropriate preliminary method for all qualitative studies. This process requires a detailed, "line-by-line" analysis of the entire dataset to assign initial codes and develop preliminary categories and dimensions. After completing this first cycle, the researcher immediately starts the second cycle of coding, returning to the beginning of the data to further refine and reorganize the codes.

The second cycle of coding attempted to make higher levels of inference, connecting statements, experiences, and reflections. Saldana (2013) referred to this second cycle of coding as "meta-code" development, which requires a different approach such as focused coding and axial coding (p. 209). Focused coding categorizes the coded data based on thematic or similarity, while axial coding describes the categories' properties, dimensions, and relations (Saldana, 2013). Finally, the last step of the coding phase was to return to the beginning and make explicit connections to the study's conceptual and/or theoretical ideas (Lester et al., 2020).

Phase Six

During phase six, the researcher refined the connections or relationships identified during step three of the previous phase of coding. That is, aggregate categories were drawn from individual codes to create themes. This was done both analytically and conceptually (Lester et al., 2020). Next, themes and statements were assigned to categories and checked for alignment with the research conceptual and analytical goals. Saldana (2013) outlined three strategies for the post-coding process, the "Top 10" list and the study's "Trinity" (p. 247). The former refers to the creation of 10 quotes or passages that best represent the study. The latter refers to the top three major codes, categories, themes and/or concepts that stand out in the study. Ideally, those themes and concepts support answering the research questions at the conclusion of the coding process.

Phase Seven

Phase seven of the thematic data analysis required the researcher to make the process transparent and verifiable (Lester et al., 2020). Organization, diligence, and detail will enable the creation of an audit trail for readers to follow alignment from codes to themes. Birks et al. (2008) argued that one of purposes of the analytic memo is to create an audit trail. Therefore, the

construction of an audit trail for thematic analysis transparency began with the memos created during phase four of the analysis process. The final product for this phase is depicted in a tabular presentation and displays the researcher's interpretation and coding process of a few representative segments from the data set (see Appendix E).

Final Report

Scholars do not agree on a standard format for reporting qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). However, there are several characteristics for the content of qualitative research reports such as the use of thick, rich descriptions, and a concrete description of people and places encountered in the research is of primary importance to qualitative final reports (Patton, 2002). The final report for this study included thick, rich descriptions in three formats. The first was a detailed and aggregate description of the participant group to inform, but also protect confidentiality. The second format consisted of the profiles with pseudonyms to highlight the participants' backgrounds to include professional and personal experiences for context. The final format included a narrative and thick descriptions. Derived from thematic analysis, the narrative findings were organized thematically with key categories and participant quotes aligned with the final themes. Conversely, the thick description followed the narrative, themes, and key categories with the goal of offering transferability beyond the original context (Creswell, 2013).

Composite Narrative

The events following the 2024 general election heightened concerns about participant anonymity, particularly given the increased scrutiny of federal worker activities amidst an aggressive workforce reduction policy. This researcher couldn't omit the rich details of each participant's story, so additional precautions were taken while still providing comprehensive

insights through the use of composite narratives. This decision also aligns with existing research informing the study's conceptual framework. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), for instance, utilized narratives in their relational research involving federal security leaders at the TSA.

Composite narratives, a valuable tool in research findings, offer a powerful and evocative way to capture the nuanced details of human experiences. This method synthesizes accounts from multiple participants into a single, first-person narrative. While its origins lie in interpretive phenomenology, composite narratives have been adapted for other qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory, to convey a rich and embodied understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

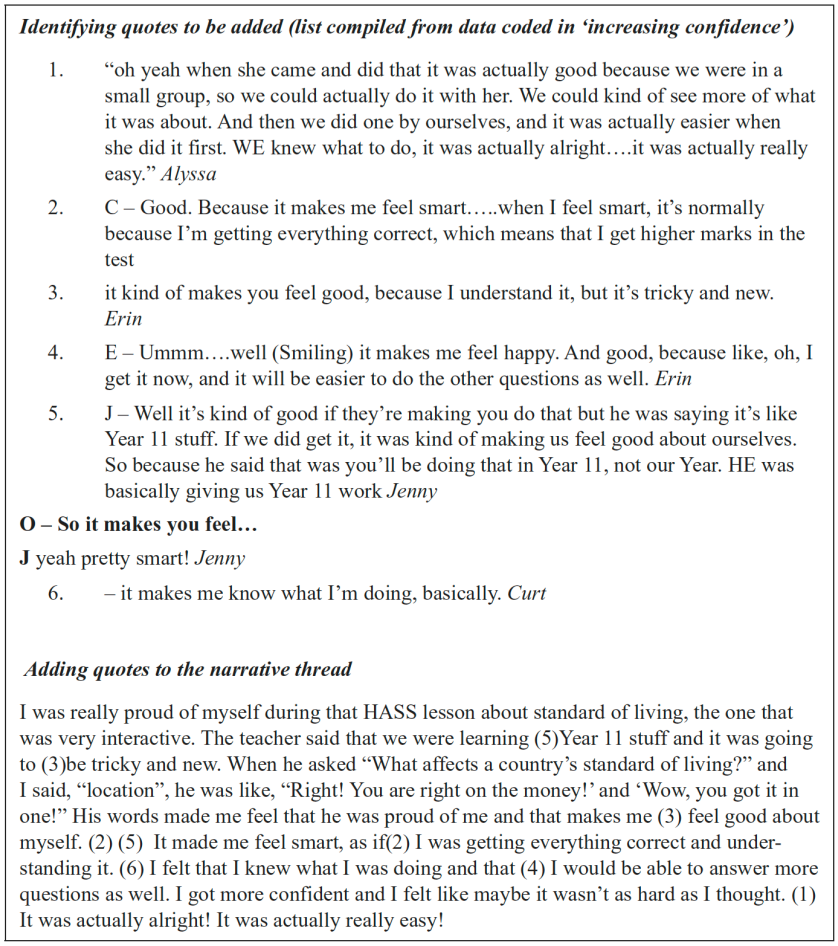
The foundation of composite narratives can be traced back to the work of psychologist Eugene Todres, who studied patients with amnesia. Todres (2007) articulated the principles of what are now known as composite narratives through his concept of "embodied interpretation" (p.?) He described this process as "re-presenting" words within narratives to encourage readers to physically experience the knowledge conveyed (Todres, 2007, as cited in Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 573). While Todres did not coin the term "composite narratives," his development of evocative prose laid the groundwork for its application in phenomenological and other qualitative research.

Narrative Process

Johnston et al. (2023) offer a transparent and exemplary illustration of composite narrative creation for research findings. In their recent publication on student classroom experiences with 13 participants, they detail a step-by-step process of transforming 48 quotes into a unified narrative. The initial step involved identifying a "narrative thread"—a key quote that can link all composite data for a single storyline (Johnston et al., 2023, p. 116). The second

step required rearranging the quotes to distill the core essence of the experience, maintaining a labeled trail for auditability without altering the original quotes (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Composite Narrative Process (Step 1)



Identifying quotes to be added (list compiled from data coded in 'increasing confidence')

1. "oh yeah when she came and did that it was actually good because we were in a small group, so we could actually do it with her. We could kind of see more of what it was about. And then we did one by ourselves, and it was actually easier when she did it first. WE knew what to do, it was actually alright….it was actually really easy." *Alyssa*
2. C – Good. Because it makes me feel smart…..when I feel smart, it's normally because I'm getting everything correct, which means that I get higher marks in the test
3. it kind of makes you feel good, because I understand it, but it's tricky and new. *Erin*
4. E – Ummm….well (Smiling) it makes me feel happy. And good, because like, oh, I get it now, and it will be easier to do the other questions as well. *Erin*
5. J – Well it's kind of good if they're making you do that but he was saying it's like Year 11 stuff. If we did get it, it was kind of making us feel good about ourselves. So because he said that was you'll be doing that in Year 11, not our Year. HE was basically giving us Year 11 work *Jenny*

O – So it makes you feel…

J yeah pretty smart! *Jenny*

6. – it makes me know what I'm doing, basically. *Curt*

Adding quotes to the narrative thread

I was really proud of myself during that HASS lesson about standard of living, the one that was very interactive. The teacher said that we were learning (5)Year 11 stuff and it was going to (3)be tricky and new. When he asked "What affects a country's standard of living?" and I said, "location", he was like, "Right! You are right on the money!' and 'Wow, you got it in one!" His words made me feel that he was proud of me and that makes me (3) feel good about myself. (2) (5) It made me feel smart, as if(2) I was getting everything correct and understanding it. (6) I felt that I knew what I was doing and that (4) I would be able to answer more questions as well. I got more confident and I felt like maybe it wasn't as hard as I thought. (1) It was actually alright! It was actually really easy!

Figure 4: Composite Narrative Process (Step 2)

Feeling smart

Sometimes, I feel proud of myself and confident that I can fulfil my teachers' expectations. Other times, I'm lost and I don't know what I'm doing.

I didn't like being in the highest stream because I felt like I couldn't achieve what my teachers expected of me. It felt pressured because everyone else was doing so well. Do you remember when the Maths teacher came in and put up that graph of our grades? The graph that showed us how in all the other classes, their grades were going up, but ours did not. None of ours really moved. It was pretty mean of the teacher to show us that graph- it was confronting and it made me feel exposed. He would be like "this is the top class, you're supposed to be good at this!" but it was bad, the class was doing bad. He was giving us Maths work that was so much harder. I would just sit there thinking, 'I can't do this! I don't know how to do this!' I needed to know the basics first. The teacher would call on me and ask me a question, but I didn't know the answer. I was so embarrassed. I didn't know what to do and I wasn't doing very well.

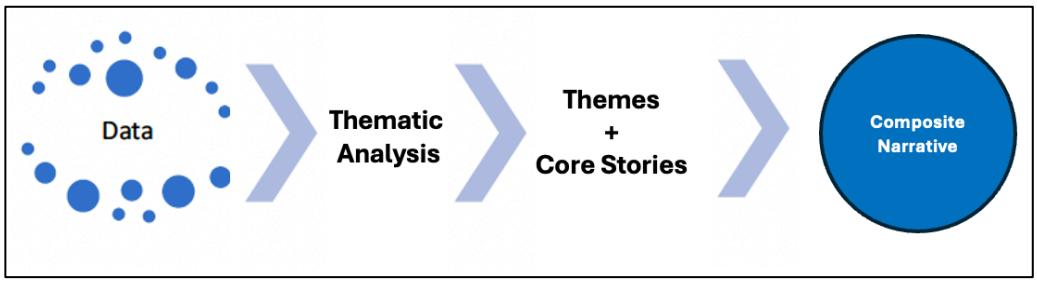
I'm more confident when I am with a good teacher. For example, I was really proud of myself during that HASS lesson about standard of living, the one that was very interactive. The teacher said that we were learning Year 11 stuff and it was going to be tricky and new. When he asked "What affects a country's standard of living?" I answered, "Location, because it affects who you can trade with and what resources you have." He was like, "Right! You are right on the money!' and 'Wow, you got it in one!" His encouragement made me feel that he was proud of me and that makes me feel good about myself. I felt smart, as if I was getting everything correct and understanding it. I knew what I was doing and that I would be able to answer more questions as well. I got more confident and I felt like maybe it wasn't as hard as I thought. It was actually alright! It was actually really easy!

The teachers who make me feel capable help me do better at school. When I feel confident, I can make my best attempt at learning and achieving highly.

Subsequently, the quotes were organized to establish a narrative flow, with minor adjustments for readability while prioritizing the participants' original language. Additional quotes reflecting similar themes identified during data analysis were also integrated at this stage. Furthermore, Johnston et al. (2023) replicated this process to develop a contrasting negative narrative, ensuring their findings encompassed both positive and negative dimensions. Finally, the researchers selected a title for the narrative that effectively highlighted the key findings. For this study, the raw interview data underwent thematic analysis to identify themes and later core stories, which were then combined to form a composite narrative for added participant

anonymity (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Thematic Analysis to Composite Narrative



Note. Modified from Watkins et.al., 2022

Trustworthiness

One way to approach validity and reliability is through careful attention to conceptualizing the way data are collected, analyzed, interpreted, and way the findings are presented by the researcher (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This study included measures to document and depict each step of the research process to aid the researcher with a mental model of the process. This study also included techniques for cross-checking information through participant review and the entire body of collected data. Moreover, prolonged engagement to the greatest extent possible and the use of spiral analysis, as well as triangulation of sources, will strengthen trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of thick descriptions for data fidelity also aided trustworthiness (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

External Reviews

The nature of qualitative research, with a human as the instrument, requires a continuous awareness of personal bias and theoretical dispositions (Patton, 2016) Systematic data collection, rigorous training, multiple data sources, and triangulation can compensate for these issues, but

external reviews provide an additional level of mitigation to ensure qualitative research is credible, trustworthy, and balanced on the phenomenon of study (Patton, 2016). External reviews are usually accomplished in two ways: member checking and peer reviews. Member checking concerns the involvement of participants of the study and conducting peer reviews requires researchers to involve an external consultant. For this study, both occurred through conducting follow-up interviews with participants and soliciting input from other expert scholars in my field.

Member Checking

Saldana's (2013) argued that researchers should consult participants during the coding process as part of validating findings. However, other researchers such as Izzy (2002) offered that member checking occur during the interview process with researchers verifying the interpretations of data with participants in real time. This technique can also increase the precision of codes during early first cycle-coding (Saldana, 2013). Harper and Cole (2012) advocated a formalized process for member checking through debriefing. They described the debriefing impact on both the researchers and participants providing a "therapeutic" outcome and leading to future therapy sessions with participants in the healthcare sector (Harper & Cole, p. 3; Brigham & Joaning, 1999; Colbourne, 2005). While this study is quite different from those conducted in the healthcare sector, the net effect of member checking is the same. Participants want, and researchers should ensure, accuracy of data/interpretations and the process provides a means for achieving this.

Harper and Cole (2012) argued that member checking creates the most value in circumstances where interviews do not take place in person. This is because the process creates quality control to improve accuracy of what was recorded during the interview. Researchers can conduct member checking during the interview by restating and summarizing the information

collected to determine accuracy through the participants' approval or disapproval. The most common approach to member checking involves participants at the conclusion of the research project to check the authenticity (Harper & Cole, 2012). Member checking during or after the completion of research is not without fault, as Harper and Cole (2012) offered, but it is proven to decrease the incidents of incorrect data and incorrect interpretation of data for the overall goal of producing authentic and original findings (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Recently, McKim (2023) argued for a structured approach to the member checking process to ensure a meaningful experience for participants. In McKim's view, participants should be viewed as the experts and asked to provide input into the initial research findings. This approach to engaging participants will bring greater value than simply asking them to review transcripts. A strong draft of the research findings should be sent to the participant with direct quotations to allow them the ability to improve the final research product through an interview and follow-up protocol. McKim recommended conducting a 10–15-minute follow-up interview asking the following questions (p. 46):

1. After reading through the findings, what are your general thoughts?
2. How accurately do you feel the findings captured your thoughts/experiences?
3. What could be added to the findings to capture your experiences better?
4. If there is anything you would like removed, what would that be and why?

This process works best if the questions are sent ahead of the follow-up interview to enable reflection before answering the questions. However, the prompts are a formal way to follow up with participants to reduce the chances of incorrect data collection and increase participant experiences captured in the research. McKim's structured approach for member checking will be used for this study on career federal leader experiences with ideologically polarized workgroups

and teams in the NCR.

Peer Review

Peer reviews provide another path for researchers to accomplish an external review of their qualitative work. Creswell (2018) refers to this peer review process as an "external audit" for examining the totality of a researcher's work to include their process and product to ensure accuracy (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Creswell also argued the peer reviewer or "auditor" have no connection to the study (p. 195). The goal for the peer review process is to determine the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data (Creswell, 2018) or, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered, create "interrater reliability" to the study (p.?). The researcher supports the peer review process through the creation of an audit log, which is described in the analysis procedures section of this study (Creswell, 2018). Peer reviews can also take the form of a debriefing of the data and the research process to an external audience (Creswell, 2018) with peer reviewers taking the role of "devil's advocates" asking difficult questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.?). This study will go through multiple iterations of peer reviewers with access to multiple career federal leaders and members of the U.S. federal government.

An interpretive community or peer reviews (Creswell, 2013) and peer examinations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) will be implemented in this study to increase credibility and trustworthiness. Multiple colleagues will be provided samples of the data for this study with the name-redacted research findings, complete with a copy of the codebook, themes, categories and subcategories, codes, and definitions. The purpose of this is to allow peers to assess the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Significant time in the way of meetings and discussion of feedback will be allotted as part of the peer review process to ensure the proper changes occur for

consensus of the findings in consultation with the research questions. The recoding of participant transcripts may occur during this process to ensure consistency throughout the research.

Researcher Reflexivity

Lincoln and Denzin (2011) referred to reflexivity as the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher as the "human as instrument" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p.?). The process of reflexivity occurred throughout the study, as described in Appendix A. Reinharz (1997) outlined three categories for reflection of the self: 1. Research-based selves, 2. Brought selves (historical, social, and personal standpoints), and 3. Situationally created selves. Each of the selves has a distinctive voice and must be interrogated, which reflexivity does, according to Lincoln and Denzin (2011), forcing a continuous questioning of the binaries and paradoxes that shape identities during the interview process and writing. In other words, it is a continuous process of questioning the self and engaging the research to better understand the how and why of discovery during research.

Patton (2014) referred to reflexivity as one of the "central strategic themes" of qualitative inquiry and designed triangulated reflexive questions for the researcher (p. 72). The researcher consulted Patton's (2014) questions to understand the sources of knowledge, perspectives of knowledge, and the anticipated reception of knowledge located in this study (see table 6).

Table 6: Reflexive Questions

Position	Question
Myself, as inquirer	How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my perspective?
People in the setting being studied	How do they know what they know? What shapes and has shaped their worldview? How do they perceive me? Why? How do I know? How do I perceive them?
Audiences for the study	How do they make sense of what I give them? What perspectives do they bring to the findings I offer? How do they perceive me? How do I perceive them?

Note. Modified from Patton, 2016.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this study are outlined in this section. Practices for ethical research before, during, and after the study are discussed below.

Participants

Protecting participants was paramount for this study and began with securing authorization to conduct research with human subjects from the George Washington University IRB. The approval process started with the completion of the Dissertation Approval Form, which certifies that all dissertation committee members agree the study will produce high-quality research. The Office of Human Research (OHR) then assessed the risk to human participants and the precautions taken.

For this study, these precautions included maintaining the confidentiality of all participants by blinding documentation and storing information on a secure cloud server. Additionally, randomly generated names were used on all transcripts. The final research report will also be produced in aggregate or narrative format to further protect participant identities.

Data collection commenced only after receiving OHR or IRB approval, and on the condition that any modifications would be submitted to the IRB for additional review and approval.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter outlined the research paradigm guiding the inquiry, research methodology, and data collection procedures. The chapter described data management and procedures for analysis. This study takes a relativist or naturalistic ontological (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and constructivist epistemological (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) approach, supported by a qualitative design. Consequently, this study assumes there are multiple realities or different interpretations, which require construction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This research approach is appropriate for seeking to understand the experiences of career federal leaders in the context of ideologically polarized workgroups and teams. Moreover, the basic qualitative design offers an optimal model for this study considering the inductive and rich description research strategies.

The thematic analysis procedures, including detailed steps for data analysis, were thoroughly presented. We also outlined considerations for trustworthiness and the methods used to enhance it throughout the study. These methods included measures for researcher reflexivity, internal (participant) review, and external (peer-checking) review. As noted in the ethical considerations section, protecting participants was essential, especially given the recent political context. For this reason, using a composite narrative further shielded participants in the study. Ultimately, the researcher's experience and training, mentorship from senior researchers, peer guidance, and adherence to IRB requirements all served to mitigate risks to research participants.

Chapter 4: Findings

As described in Chapter 3, the findings that follow are conveyed using a composite narrative for increased participant anonymity. Despite the story format, the findings account for how career federal leaders experience ideological polarization and lead within the same context. Moreover, the themes from the thematic analysis are outlined in each section of the narrative, in the chapter summary, and discussed further in Chapter 5. The narrative centers on Cameron, a senior policy advisor, GS level 15, career federal employee, in a leadership role at the Department of Government Services (DGS), a fictional federal agency in the NCR. While the agency is fictitious and names anonymized, the narrative timeline mirrors historic events while the core stories and quotes are based real interview data.

The composite narrative begins with the start of a new presidential administration, charting the course of a policy cycle: from dissemination, development, and implementation to its programmatic focus. Cameron's team navigates policy issues through internal and external collaboration. However, as time progresses, a divergence of views on these policies creates growing tension among team members within DGS subordinate departments. Adding to this challenge, Cameron faces pressure from a political appointee, a representative of the administration, to push initiatives forward despite the agency-level disagreements. The narrative follows Cameron and colleagues over several years, reaching its climax during an election year, where the pursuit of policy goals becomes increasingly urgent, shaped by campaign politicization and the imperative to protect the incumbent president's legacy.

The composite narrative in this study is organized into several core stories, each developed from the rich participant data (see Appendix D). It begins with an introduction story that establishes the leader context for operating within federal agencies. The narration,

descriptions, and dialogue in this introductory piece are carefully crafted from composite quotes, reflecting participants' overarching experiences and highlighting the often continuous, stressful, and thankless nature of their roles. Following this foundational introduction, a series of distinct core narrative stories delve into specific facets of their experiences. These include a story detailing encounters with blatant partisanship displayed online while representing the fictional DGS agency and a narrative on pandemic polarization that serves as an opening conflict, drawing directly from participant experiences. The "Clean Energy" story illustrates participant encounters with significant policy swings, specifically a rapid shift toward all-electric vehicles and energy-efficient workspaces post-return-to-work. Challenges related to government accountability, including program audibility and senior executive transparency, are explored in another story. Moreover, the composite narrative includes two stories centered on social demographics: "Homelessness in America," which outlines participant experiences with social programs aimed at protecting homeless populations, and "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)," which describes their experiences with policy and programs across the fictional DGS agency. Finally, the narrative on the war in Gaza illuminates the difficulties in achieving full transparency regarding human rights violations.

Table 7: Composite Narrative Summary Table

Story	Character	Role	Relationship	Plot/Summary
Government Leadership	Cameron	Senior Advisor for Policy and Programs	Supervises Pacey, Hildred, Ollie, Merit, Lorin, Santana	Establish leadership experience in government
Pandemic Polarization	Pacey	Research Programs	Reports to Cameron; works with Avery	Confronting workplace polarization
Clean Energy	Hildred	Energy Programs	Reports to Cameron	Making sense of energy policy oscillation
Government Accountability	Ollie	Audit Programs	Reports to Cameron	Accounting for government spending and Executive transparency
War in Gaza	Merit	Human Rights Policy	Reports to Cameron	Reporting human rights violations abroad
Homelessness in America	Lorin	Social Programs	Reports to Cameron	Delivering on social programs
Diversity Equity and Inclusion	Santana	DEI Policy	Reports to Cameron	Changing workplace demographics

Note. Author original.

Leading in Federal Agencies

The following sections establish the broader context for leadership within federal agencies through the experiences of Cameron, a composite character representing multiple participants. Beginning with a description of the fictional, yet prototypical DGS, Cameron provides insight into the roles, perspectives, and challenges faced by senior policy advisors to agency secretaries.

Department of Government Services

Each office at DGS was spacious but in limited supply. This meant most employees within each directorate at DGS worked in cubicles. Conference rooms divided each floor, providing a space for collaboration. A café offered space for casual discussion as well as other common areas around the building, the architecture being from the early 20th century. Cameron's office was on the 7th floor, just down the hall from the political appointee leading the agency.

Placement and access allowed Cameron to meet with political leaders often and become familiar with many over the years. Cameron once boasted to a colleague, “Sometimes I do have some personal pull because I work with political appointees.”

Years of interactions with political appointees resulted in well-developed relationships, which lasted well beyond changes of administration. Appointees often return to government in higher positions of authority when their political party wins, which served Cameron well over the years. Colleagues often turned to Cameron for assistance when “stonewalled” in the process of collaborating with other agencies on policies and programs. In 2021, the new administration sent an old friend to lead DGS, which put Cameron in a position to influence change across multiple agencies. This connection gave Cameron’s efforts a larger impact and team members extremely important roles.

Passionate People

Every government agency houses a policy office, a crucial function that supports the executive branch in developing and implementing policies and programs aligned with the administration’s agenda. Cameron stepped into a senior policy advisor role a few years ago, a transition that brought multiple direct reports and, as Cameron often reflected, a significant mental shift. This shift particularly highlighted the challenge of relying on professional development and “gut feelings” for leadership, rather than formally recognized leadership methodologies. Cameron frequently confided in mentors, expressing, “There are executive presence skills based on research that I should consider, but I don't feel it’s authentic or that approach appropriate for my team; it could be harmful.”

Cameron led a team of highly capable career federal employees, primarily GS-13 and GS-14 levels. Most of them had been with the fictional DGS agency for over a decade,

possessing extensive experience in managing policies and programs. Cameron's leadership style focused on empowering the team to their fullest abilities, consistently encouraging them to explore the boundaries of knowledge to ensure the success of their work.

Each member of Cameron's team was responsible for a distinct policy issue. Ollie, with a finance background, managed fiscal accountability policy and program audits. Santana, trained in human resources, oversaw diversity policy and programs. Hildred, an engineer, was responsible for clean energy conversion initiatives. Lorin, a longtime educator, handled education policy. Finally, Merit, a foreign affairs specialist, was assigned human rights policy and violations during the war in Gaza. Merit's role was unusual for DGS but deemed necessary due to the administration's shortage of expertise on the conflict. Merit's analyses, after clearing Cameron's review and the political appointee leading DGS, made their way directly to the administration.

Managing Multiple Realities

As illustrated above, Cameron's job involved managing a team of policy analysis and program managers for DGS and providing advice to a political appointee with overall responsibility for meeting the president's agenda. Cameron would often comment, "I love what I do, the challenge and satisfaction of serving a greater purpose." A native of the Mid-Atlantic, Cameron started work in the government as an intern and progressed to senior policy advisor, having graduated from George Mason and Georgetown Universities. In the last few years, Cameron observed an intensification of differences among peers across agencies and subordinates internal to DGS. This shift in dispositions increased the time needed for policy development and programmatic change and added friction in the workplace through peer

conflict. Cameron confided in peers, “It often felt like people argued and pushed back on ideas because they had different views on the truth or, worse, just for the sake of doing so.”

At its core, polarization at the department came from the difficulty federal leaders experienced when attempting to gain consensus on a policy issue, which in turn affected how programs adjusted. Available research and editorials by professionals support both sides of any issue. Cameron managed the academic sources the department’s policy analysis and program managers used for recommendations, but to limited effect. The broader context of polarization added to this challenge. Cameron had witnessed large protests and counterprotests, year after year, a divided nation continuously on display in the nation’s capital. Historically, each administration’s policies are the manifestation of political issues— policy implemented through enduring programs, albeit with some variation following each peaceful transfer of power. A trusted officer of the government, Cameron committed to service for the public good, but it became increasingly difficult to develop a shared reality as polarized ideas and beliefs infiltrated the workplace.

Agency Processes – “Spinning Plates”

“Sometimes I think of the movie *Groundhog Day* when coming to work. And that I often can’t place when things occur in the past without a calendar and my notebook seems to solidify this idea.” Cameron’s work never stopped. But this is the life of a senior policy advisor at a large federal agency. The policy process refers to a set of activities that often end with enduring programs or temporary projects, an expression of policy. The process starts with understanding the problem, which requires research and dialogue with the appropriate policy councils. Each member of Cameron’s team does this individually and meets weekly rotations to discuss solutions. Despite having the ability to connect with over a dozen policy analysts, Cameron

limited her contact at the department to direct reports and once told a colleague, “I should have been better with everyone and made more effort to connect with more junior staff members. After all, they are responsible for my success.” There was no shortage of work given the progressive executive orders following inauguration in January 2021. Time raced in the building each day, and back-to-back meetings daily left little time to engage anyone outside the established hierarchy. Like an acrobat with “spinning plates,” as Cameron would say, it took all of Cameron’s energy and focus to keep the policies and programs going under normal settings. This meant iterative agency efforts and a normal policy process. However, increased polarization created punctuated equilibrium or a reactionary approach to policy and program development. In other words, more wobbly plates.

Cameron’s weekly routine involved meetings with direct reports, each of whom worked on a specific policy issue. The meetings were critical for recommendations to the department leadership and often ran over time from extended discussions on the issues. Each direct report brought a team of analysts with them for the meeting, which Cameron enjoyed as it was the only opportunity to see outside an immediate circle. There were also times when Cameron would call emergency meetings based on seismic policy shifts. Those meetings were the most consequential because it meant the administration had changed course or reacted sharply to a pressing national issue. Cameron had to make sure the department responded in the most informed way while keeping other processes going - spinning plates.

Pandemic Polarization: Winter 2020

Overview: This section of the composite narrative describes leader interactions with opposing sides of polarization. First, Cameron, subordinate Pacey, and deputy Avery recount their experiences and response to an employee violating the Hatch Act by promoting a political party and COVID-19 conspiracies on social media while displaying DGS affiliation. Conversely, Cameron also addresses a manager who abuses the remote work policy, attempting to coordinate actions through government systems that require a physical presence at DGS. Thus, the narrative presents, on one side, an employee seeking to influence others with their political views, beginning with office comments, and, on the other, a manager who disengages entirely, working from home due to virus fears despite essential worker requirements. Cameron provides the narrative lens, while Pacey and Avery represent a composite of participants with similar experiences and contexts.

Confronting A Partisan Colleague

"You have to just trust the process." Cameron leaned forward to peer closer into the government-furnished laptop at the conclusion of a weekly update meeting. A member of the team had revealed their political affiliation, posting an iconic partisan hat. The signs were there but intensified leading up to and through January 2021. Ollie, a longtime analyst for Cameron, pressed: "I don't think it is fair to give this person a paid vacation." Cameron wanted to say more but didn't want to escalate the situation. "What can I possibly say to put everyone at ease?" Cameron wondered. Ollie was right, the person in question made comments around the office, put up political cartoons on their cubicle, and eventually took their views on the Corona-19 virus online, brandishing political paraphernalia, while representing themselves as a member of the department. Eventually, several members of the team reported the behavior, but they felt more

needed to happen. Cameron countered: “I understand, and the Hatch Act is clear. Please just let the process play out.” A process existed for reprimand, and Cameron, one of the most senior members at the department, diligently listened to the team’s feelings but acted according to policy. The violator would eventually return to work for a brief period and then retire, but the entire episode resonated with Cameron’s team. This issue arrived at the moment of change across the executive branch with a new administration. Both old and new political leaders returned to government charged with expressing different ideas on how government should function and who should lead.

At about the same time, Cameron confronted a manager unwilling to return to the office, citing concerns for employees that viewed the virus as “fake” and did not mask properly in common spaces. The problem was, as Pacey put it, “The work we are doing is essential and some things cannot be done from home using government systems.”

Office Space

As 2020 progressed, the comments about politics were becoming more frequent at the conclusion of meetings. Pacey thought often of mentioning the problem of implicit political attitude in meetings with a team member to Cameron, but always decided against bringing the problem to someone that had more problems than anyone else at DGS. By February 2020, the team was moving at full speed on several policy and program items. Pacey wondered constantly about the line between sarcasm and politics in office talk. More importantly, Pacey wondered how and when it was appropriate to cross the rows of cubicles at DGS to have a talk with the person in question. They all know we are supposed to be apolitical, right? Pacey thought. This was just common sense, but the campaign for the general was in full swing. “You don’t want to know my real thoughts on vaccines . . .” Pacey overheard a conversation in the breakroom. What

did that mean? “Liberals . . .” Okay, that’s definitely not helpful. And was that the same person driving the car with a political bumper sticker? But, as laughter filled the breakroom and Pacey remembered having a lot of work to do, emails piled up along with memos for review in a physical inbox on the desk.

Pacey watched as something about a virus ran across the television mounted to the wall in an office. A senior government official seemed to be explaining something about China. However, time came for an afternoon meeting and Pacey moved down the spacious hall to a large conference room to discuss several program changes for the coming months. Several members of the team shared their concerns prior to the meeting, but before they could discuss them, Pacey made time to raise the issue of political opinions in the office to everyone, which would avoid a direct confrontation. “I know we are in the midst of a general election and more of the news is focused on the election, but please keep your political opinions outside the workspace.” Everyone on the team looked out at Pacey across the large oak (or faux wood) conference table with a serious demeanor, which included a few of the violators. The entire act made Pacey nervous but it had to be done. The election year would bring more media attention towards DGS and the politicization of everything by summer. One of Pacey’s longtime coworkers shot back playfully, “I feel like you are looking at me.” The banter is what caused the problem but also kept moral high during the difficult periods of policy and program execution. Keeping spirts high was essential for public service, especially for what was about to come - a global pandemic.

Online Presence

By the spring of 2020, the director of health and human services was on every news outlet daily. The Corona-19 virus outbreak caused the world to stand still for a brief period.

Images of empty highways, parked busses, planes, and trains brought a sense of reality to the priority of human life as millions died around the world daily. For Pacey, everyone was out of the office and working from home, which complicated the task of leading a large team at DGS. Many returned to the office following knowledge of the virus; essential workers and leaders such as Pacey and Cameron would rotate from days at home when needed. This shift to the virtual environment limited Pacey's ability to monitor political opinions between employees in common spaces, but those that put their thoughts online were immediately flagged and reported. What was once playful banter and political sarcasm in the coffee room, on topics like vaccines, transformed into stream-of-consciousness posts on social media on topics like vaccines.

Secret supporters for the incumbent political party were slowly revealing themselves. "Did you see this?" said Avery, one of Pacey's direct reports. Avery sent a message using Microsoft Teams, a screenshot of another team member's Facebook post on the vaccine being fake, complete with the DGS seal marking this person as a government official. Pacey messaged back, "When did you see this? Are there others?" Pacey immediately contacted Cameron as there wasn't an option this time, it was clear, and so was the Hatch Act. Pacey came to find out that Avery had already sent the images, there were multiple on masking and other conspiracies, to the ethics office. They would start an investigation. "I don't understand why people do these kinds of things," said Pacey, but Cameron was already aware of this type of behavior from other directors like Pacey. Cameron responded: "Thanks for bringing this to my attention, I don't know, but we are going to push through, report this individual and push through. We have a lot of things to close out or review before the new administration, and a few more executive orders were signed today." Pacey reports of employees from DGS supporting political riots and counter-riots during the summer and the day of election certification as the incumbent lost to the

opposition party. “I don’t think I have ever seen something like this in all my years working in government.”

Hatch Act

“It looks like this person is on the GAMA side of the fence,” said Avery. “I think this is going to be a real problem for the team.” “Well, this is why we have the Hatch Act,” said Pacey, remembering this same individual questioning everything before the start of the pandemic. The Hatch Act is a federal law passed by Congress in 1939 to limit political activities of federal employees, to include state and local employees connected to federally funded programs according to the U.S. Office of Special Council. The idea, everyone understood at DGS, is to ensure programs are administered in nonpartisan ways and prevent political coercion. That last part, coercion sounds severe, but there are levels of affecting political behavior. The use of different mediums for narratives and technological advances such as artificial intelligence and social media algorithms create new components to an old problem.

Pacey, would ultimately make the call to let this individual know they were under investigation for violating the act, a difficult task made both expedient and awkward through a virtual conference call. Avery reminded Pacey of the concern beforehand, a “preach to the choir” moment. “Hell, everyone has always been cautious with participating in anything that can be misinterpreted as political support; it’s tough. But simply, we have a long-standing policy that members of DGS do not comment on anything political, you know, we are serious about the implications of the law.” “Thanks for the talking points,” said Pacey, trying to lighten up the mood. Avery continued, “I don’t think I have ever seen this type of thing tolerated, I mean, we all refuse to let our partisan views color our work, so should this person.” Pacey agreed, “We see things in right and wrong, legal or illegal full stop, I will carry the message. You going to be on

the call, Avery?" Pacey already confirmed Cameron's participation. "Yes," said Avery, who enjoyed the opportunity to protect the institution and the integrity of public service.

Ultimately, those that violated the Hatch Act were reprimanded and lost pay, but allowed to return to work for the new administration. The team was bitter, but there was lots of work to do with a new administration and policy agenda reversing many of the previous actions of the last administration. The return to work, vaccination and mask requirements in all, brought new challenges for Pacey. Cameron commanded attention in the largest DGS conference room welcoming everyone back to work for the first time since the pandemic. "It's great to have everyone back to work we have many new faces in charge, but some familiar, and with the full team on the ground we will be able to accomplish more through personal connections and observing requirements for DGS in the physical space." At the same time of Cameron's large group welcome, Pacey and Avery were struggling to get everyone back in the office. The very real concern of working with reprimanded employees, conspiracy theorists, caused some to remain home through unofficial agreements and exceptions to the return-to-work policy. The problem with this was that some procedures required access to systems only available on site at DGS.

Remote Work

Avery spent one too many hours assisting a peer that refused to return to work and made this known to Pacey for action. The problem was that despite their technical expertise, this person did not want to work in an office with potential virus deniers and vaccine protesters. Eventually, the vaccine would become mandatory for government employees, but until then the remote employee, a manager for analytics, found ways to get by—Avery's help. This problem would cripple productivity. Pacey and Avery met frequently to discuss the problem. "I've been

helping this dude for some time. I thought eventually he would return but now it doesn't look likely and my own work and team is now suffering as a result. What is being done about bringing the other team lead for analytics back?" Pacey could see the frustration on Avery's face. Like everything else when it came to personnel management there was a process, and it seemed as if that needed to start sooner than later. DGS had returned to a sense of normalcy but the absence of key leaders had ripple effects across the organization. Complaints about this team leader's style further complicated the problem.

Pacey and Avery discussed what was occurring in detail to document for human resources in the likely event of arbitration or mediation. "I am hearing that this is a pretty quiet guy, but difficult to understand, tell me what's going on Avery." "Yeah, he's highly technical but lacks people skills on top of not being in the building for the last year to communicate directly with," said Avery. "Despite this, his team has done fairly well," Avery said admittedly. Pacey asked, "Is it a medical issue? Why won't he return?" Avery did not know the answer to that question and suggested reaching out as soon as possible. Pacey immediately realized, thinking almost aloud, "This is going to become a huge conflict," one that would likely involve Cameron and other human resource professionals. More members of the organization were demonstrating obstinance in different ways since the reprimand of another employee for violating the Hatch Act.

Limits of Virtual Leadership

The core issue had to do with the requirement for accessing government databases or the "lab" all the analysts used at DGS. Pacey described the issue to Cameron as they decided the next steps. "My team lead for analysis does not want to return to work because of concern for working with people that do not take the virus seriously. As a result, this individual is remaining

home despite the need to access our systems." Cameron could see where this was going. The return to work had been difficult for everyone, but this was a clear case where someone refused to accept change and the associated requirements based on their duties and responsibilities.

Pacey went into details regarding access requirements for Cameron. "The team lead insisted on working remotely, making subordinates come in to run reports and scan them for distribution." Cameron said, "This is clearly wrong and I think we need to confront this issue immediately." However, both Pacey and Avery had different views on working towards a resolution. Pacey recommended allowing the current process to continue while seeking mediation on the issue starting with the security concerns for scanning reports and sending them over email. "I think we can get this individual to stop getting the reports based on the security concerns and then work through the return-to-work issue," said Pacey.

Summary

This story, woven from the experiences of Cameron, Deputy Avery, and Program Director Pacey, illustrates the initial contours of ideological polarization within leadership at DGS. It highlights how agency-level beliefs clashed with evolving organizational expectations, particularly when employees' public actions diverged from DGS's mission and policies. The narrative unfolds around a critical incident: an employee's violation of the Hatch Act. This individual not only promoted a political party but also disseminated COVID-19 conspiracies on social media, all while explicitly displaying their DGS affiliation. This incident forced leaders like Cameron, Deputy Avery, and Pacey to confront the ethical and professional boundaries of employee conduct, especially concerning the perception of the agency. Their collective responses reveal the complexities of addressing such breaches when personal ideologies bleed into professional representation.

Compounding this challenge, Cameron recounts a separate incident involving a manager who exploited the remote work policy, attempting to coordinate actions through government systems that required a physical presence at DGS. This scenario further underscored the tension between individual preferences for remote work and the agency's imperative for on-site presence, particularly for essential employees with leadership responsibilities. In both instances, the experiences pointed to a palpable agency-level rejection of emerging change. Employees' actions, whether through public social media posts representing the organization or through resistance to updated on-site work requirements, directly contradicted the agency's evolving operational and ethical standards. This divergence in views, especially regarding the program's focus and the necessity of on-site presence for leadership roles, created significant friction. The fact that the individuals in question held positions of authority further amplified the ideological polarization, transforming it into a clear issue of power dynamics within the agency.

This narrative further illuminates the complex terrain of leadership in the context of polarization, as observed through the actions of Pacey and Cameron. Confronted with the unfolding ideological divides, their primary goal was to preserve open dialogue and facilitate perspective sharing across the multiple, contentious issues. The blatant violation of the Hatch Act, while creating immediate friction among subordinates, also exposed a fundamental disconnect in perspectives. The employee in question did not perceive their social media activity, promoting a political party and COVID-19 conspiracies while displaying DGS affiliation, as a violation, but rather as an exercise of their individual rights. This stark difference in interpretation presented a significant challenge for leadership.

Recognizing these divergent viewpoints, Pacey strategically appealed to the team for patience with the investigative process. This approach aimed to de-escalate immediate tensions and create space for due process, signaling a commitment to fairness even amidst strong emotional responses from those reporting the violation. Simultaneously, Cameron navigated the challenge of a manager abusing remote work policy, which further highlighted the tension between individual autonomy and organizational needs. Both leaders, through their distinct but complementary actions, sought to model a path forward that prioritized agency integrity and a reasoned approach over reactive measures.

In essence, Pacey and Cameron's responses underscore a commitment to maintaining a functional organizational environment, even when faced with deeply entrenched ideological differences. Their efforts to ensure communication, manage expectations, and uphold established processes became central to mitigating the disruptive potential of polarization, demonstrating a nuanced approach to leadership in a divided workplace.

Clean Energy: Fall 2021

Overview: This narrative section draws on the experiences of four individuals describing the challenges of leading during major policy changes in 2021. Hildred, a senior engineer, who reports to Cameron at DGS, is responsible for shifting the agency's fuel consumption from fossil fuels to clean energy, a significant undertaking given the thousands of vehicles and gas-powered machines at federal worksites across the U.S. Hildred also manages property acquisitions, including the efficient use of building workspaces for a post-pandemic return to work. Frequent policy swings and subsequent program adjustments foster institutional resilience, as Hildred describes, but the change is not easy. DGS directorates hold differing views on the issues surrounding clean energy and the feasibility of full electrification, particularly given that the infrastructure does not yet support the policy initiative across the federal government. Cameron and Hildred discuss these challenges and potential solutions as they prepare an update for the DGS secretary.

"Get ready for all things electric," Cameron mentioned during a team update, seeming somewhat sarcastic, a departure from normal demeanor. The most pressing issue Cameron faced early in the new administration was that of climate change and an aggressive policy agenda to shift away from fossil fuels. Policy advisors such as Cameron make a distinction between issues and problems. The former refers to the competing views concerning reality, while the latter refers to needs or opportunities for improving conditions (Dunn, 2012). In other words, problems are slightly easier to handle. Cameron and team mostly handled issues such as clean energy. Data to support the climate demands for clean energy or the associated wasteful spending against clean energy surfaced depending on the administration. The new administration had

overwhelming evidence to support the shift to clean energy, and Cameron was ready to respond to the latest "policy swing" as Cameron says.

"Spirited" Discussions

Meetings usually began for Cameron by late morning to provide enough time for "R.T.C.," Reading, Thinking, and Communicating. The front office secretary for Cameron often ensured the calendar reflected the codeword and protected the time without fail. Cameron often did more thinking than communicating, given the plethora of issues managed at the agency. At about 10:30 a.m., Hildred entered Cameron's office, a three-person team in tow. Hildred would often say, "I always carry my team and their stories with me." Young, energetic, and wearing professional clothing that looked borrowed, Hildred's analysts were either interns or junior federal employees with engineering or public policy backgrounds. Like Cameron, Hildred started at DGS as an intern. They both reflected on their own early days as they worked with the next generation of federal leaders. Hildred studied engineering in college and had only one job since graduating over a decade ago. Working at DGS wasn't Hildred's dream job after leaving James Madison University, but federal work was meaningful and stable. And by this point, Hildred was the only one at DGS responsible for managing transportation acquisition, working diligently to meet the shift to electric and energy efficiency across government, thousands of government vehicles, and millions of square feet of office space.

Hildred, a Virginia native, came of age helping a family business and was especially sensitive to new ventures. One of Hildred's analysts described the numbers and costs associated with supporting the clean energy mandate. Cameron rocked back in the chair at the head of the table. "I really appreciate all the hard work from the team, great information for my discussion with the DGS coming up." Hildred interrupted Cameron to describe the months of work the

team spent and proceeded to describe the crux of the situation. “The team put a lot of sweat and tears towards developing the full cost of electrification of vehicles. And the ability to do that followed the successful pull of information from all the modes [subdepartments], which was like pulling teeth. Thanks for reaching out to those that were slow to comply.” Cameron was happy to hear the additional nudging helped. “No problem,” Cameron said.

The executive order had sweeping ideas on a full-scale approach to clean energy without the details of how full electric power might work. Hildred offered, “The president’s Environmental Council is full of ideas and no experience, but they are dead serious given the aggressive policy stance.” Cameron could imagine the look on Hildred’s face at those meetings. At this point, Cameron stopped reviewing the meeting documents. Hildred went on, “You know our number one priority is delivering, and without supporting infrastructure and funding, we had a few spirited discussions.” Cameron thought about the internal response asking, “How did our modes assist with solutions?” Hildred held back for a second, not wanting to waste Cameron’s time with the full details, before giving a short response: “We did have pushback; people have different ideas about the policy agenda, the feasibility, and the risk of not having a functioning organization because of the rapid transformation.”

Rhetoric Meets Reality

Hildred spent the remaining time in the meeting describing the core issue and proposed solutions. Despite the view from the president’s Environmental Council, DGS has a requirement to continue delivering services. Hildred offered, “In rural areas, the infrastructure just isn’t there for any vehicles, much less government vehicles. We advised the council that pressure only aggravated something that was not immediately possible. I don’t think people are being fully transparent about reality at the top.” Cameron stopped Hildred. “They know. I speak with my

political appointee friends daily on this issue, especially infrastructure. I think the problem is the issue of climate is becoming more and more charged, so maybe what you are seeing is an aggressive stance to prove the concept of full electrification." Hildred was apparently shocked but not surprised. Hildred understood Cameron's revelation to mean the entire exercise of full electrification was indeed an effort to prove the opposition party wrong.

After detailing the problem, Hildred informed Cameron of the team's progress and the process they used to develop solutions. "Again, it's crucial to remember that our budget hasn't increased, yet each electric vehicle replacing a gasoline one incurs a surcharge for service and charging," Hildred emphasized. "So, what are the financial implications?" Cameron inquired. Hildred responded sharply, "We're talking about thousands, even tens of thousands, for chargers and ongoing services. We have thousands of vehicles, and the minimal charging times required for safe operation present a significant logistical challenge." It was fundamentally an engineering problem, but with the added layer of skepticism surrounding the entire endeavor (climate change, etc.), particularly within Congress, Hildred's frustration, coupled with a fear of future policy reversals, was palpable. However, through numerous meetings with colleagues across DGS directorates and various agencies, incorporating new perspectives and expert insights, Hildred had formulated a workable solution.

A Multivoiced Solution

Hildred took a tour of multiple DGS facilities and met with hundreds of people. "It took me over a month, but it was nice to meet the professionals throughout government." Cameron wished for that opportunity, to meet the faces of those affected by the very policies under DGS review and execution. "All that moving around and meeting new people must have been fun," said Cameron. "It got tiring quickly," said Hildred. The culmination of exploring departments

was a lengthy report on the costs, benefits, and risks, complete with options such as integrating hybrid vehicles at some locations where charging infrastructure was limited or nonexistent. Hildred offered, “We brought in young engineers, interns we were developing, and different experts. Everyone left their assumptions at the door for discussions. It was a deliberate and painful process to ensure we met the requirements for electrification while ensuring we did not jeopardize our mission.” Cameron was impressed with the level of rigor and passion Hildred put towards the policy issue and concluded the meeting: “Thanks for this wonderful work. Again, I appreciate what you and the team have done despite the inherent challenges from pressure and various viewpoints.” Hildred’s proposal was now in Cameron’s hands to deliver to the Secretary of DGS for review and approval.

Efficient Workspace Allocation

Another part of the clean energy policy concerned facility usage. “We needed to develop a new baseline for workspace, which was controversial due to differing views on remote and hybrid work,” Hildred explained. Cameron grasped the challenge but wondered about precedent. “How long has it been since something like this was done?” Cameron asked. Hildred met Cameron’s gaze with a deadpan stare. “1985, so yeah, this was a heavy lift.” Hildred and the team were essentially returning to first principles, questioning the status quo to fully justify space requirements, especially given the significant changes in government programs since then.

Cameron considered that Hildred’s task would require approval from newer, lower-level political appointees, who would also need to become comfortable with the spatial changes. “Are you concerned about the response from new agency deputies?” Cameron inquired. Hildred paused. “There’s always friction with a new administration. I’ve been through four rounds of appointees, so I anticipate some pushback, even from their own people.” Hildred continued,

“This is where our approach to the issue really mattered.” Hildred was partly referring to understanding the various cultures within and across agencies. “Every agency, and some departments for that matter, has its own culture and way of doing business. Our team just had to understand that going in.”

Solution with “Guardrails”

Ultimately, implementing an aggressive energy policy that scrutinized all sources of energy consumption and space occupancy necessitated both concessions and clear boundaries. In instances where agencies couldn’t agree on specific programmatic changes, predefined guardrails allowed lower-level leaders to sort out the finer details. “It was really nice what they did; the interns and more junior staff put together a great presentation for the roll-out,” Hildred noted. The net result of this workspace optimization was a standardization of spatial requirements, significantly reducing wasted space in compliance with the new policy.

Cameron then inquired, “What was the consensus on space requirements, and how do you recommend communicating the impact of these changes on the clean energy policy?” Hildred chuckled before responding, “Do you really want to know? Okay, since you asked, we agreed on assistant secretaries getting 400 square feet, senior executives (SESs) getting 300 square feet, and everyone else 150 square feet.” These final dimensions were the most impactful, as each DGS component previously held its own understanding of spatial needs for employees outside of senior staff.

Divergent Views on Standardization

Another challenging component of achieving a programmatic focus was the general caution agencies and departments exercised when reconsidering the status quo. “I could tell throughout the process of developing a policy implementation plan that there was an

apprehension or very cautious approach in general," Hildred remarked. It didn't matter that Cameron and other senior leaders nudged them on the clean energy policy; a new standard for occupancy based on energy consumption demanded a significant shift in established practices. "I did what I could to help," Cameron stated. Hildred responded, "It's no problem. The process of getting people to put themselves in someone else's shoes, while challenging, was both necessary and effective. We all got to see the problem of space, energy consumption, and the potential savings for the taxpayer."

Summary

This narrative segment underscores the inherent tension between the administration's ambitious policy goals and the often complex practical realities of implementation within DGS. It highlights the intricate balancing act required to reconcile high-level policy objectives with the operational needs, financial constraints, and distinct cultural norms of various agency programs. Drawing from the perspectives of senior career federal leaders, the challenges of this dynamic were particularly evident in two aggressive initiatives: the mandated shift to a fully electric vehicle fleet and the maximization of workspace utilization. Their experiences reflect a pervasive agency-level view on the difficulties of enacting such sweeping changes.

Ultimately, the leaders developed solutions centered on standardization and clear boundaries. However, the implementation process itself became a vivid demonstration of the complexities involved in reconciling top-down directives with bottom-up realities, and the cautious approach agencies often take when reconsidering the status quo. Hildred's efforts particularly exemplify this, as she meticulously articulated the "guardrails" or parameters for program focus. This illustrates a key emergent theme: differences at the program level on how initiatives will be executed. Furthermore, this part of the narrative exposes the subtle yet

impactful interpersonal dynamics of polarization. Hildred's response to these dynamics—her deliberate effort to ensure a "multivoiced" solution—stands out. Her leadership approach in fostering inclusivity within the decision-making process was crucial in navigating the inherent conflicts and building pathways toward shared understanding amidst differing perspectives.

Government Accountability: Summer 2022

This part of the narrative, drawing from the experiences of two individuals, describes the complexities of leading an audit at DGS in 2022. Ollie guides a conversation with Cameron, the senior policy advisor, regarding the audit's status. This exchange reveals the polarized opinions surrounding government accountability as Ollie recounts the hurdles of the auditing process, varying viewpoints on compliance, the necessity of ethical and moral courage, and the influence of power and authority wielded through politically motivated personal agendas. Despite recognizing the significant differences between the U.S. government and the financial world, Ollie's segment in the composite narrative emphasizes that the core principles of accounting, interpersonal connections, and leadership remain essential. Cameron departs from this discussion with a deeper comprehension of the latent problems within DGS.

Cameron's attention shifted briefly from some of the more pressing policy issues to the one with a slower burn—government audits. A recent meeting between Cameron and Ollie, a DGS auditor, centered on the delicate art of conducting audits effectively. The importance of gaining cooperation, building bridges of understanding, and adapting one's communication style to the nuances of individual personalities was essential. Ollie led DGS's first full financial statement audit, a task that required not just financial acumen but also a keen understanding of human nature. Ollie had managed a substantial team of civilians and contractors, fostering a sense of peerage rather than strict hierarchy. "These are the team members I work with," Ollie would often say, a subtle yet powerful distinction that cultivated collaboration and mutual respect. However, the audit process wasn't always met with open arms. Cameron asked about the current audit, "How are things going with the current audits?"

"We're hopeful for compliance this time. It'll be painful to ask for another signature for noncompliance from the boss," Ollie said with a soft exhale, leaning back in the chair. This was a closed-door discussion due to its sensitive nature. Both Ollie and Cameron were subconsciously aware of the mounting political pressure to justify the department's ledger. The soft hums about accountability had the potential to become loud roars, especially given the government's increasing fiscal concerns.

Cameron paused, then asked Ollie to start from the beginning to explain the process and current standing. This is the work of senior policy advisors, Cameron thought, knowing very little about technical topics like auditing large agencies, but expected to present the problem to agency secretaries on demand. "No problem," Ollie replied, starting with a disclaimer: "They only knew what leaders in the directorates were willing to share."

Accounting Processes

Prior to meeting with Cameron, Ollie frequently confided in staff members about the issues and flaws within the government accounting process. "I don't understand why more people aren't concerned about federal financial law," Ollie remarked, referring to the Federal Managers Financial Integrity Act (FMFIA). Signed into law in 1982, this act mandates that agencies establish internal controls to prevent waste or misuse of funds and ensure asset accountability, primarily through a statement of assurance. This "financial statement," as Ollie called it, was not a priority at DGS, and other peer agencies routinely signed statements of noncompliance. Over the years, this disregard never sat well with Ollie, particularly when working at agencies funded by congressionally appropriated funds, such as defense.

Ollie would often tell a small group of trusted auditors, "I think we need, despite our culture, to do everything possible for compliance; anything else is effectively breaking the law in

my view." Agency culture and a lack of concern from department leaders allowed the financial statement to become a low priority. Furthermore, different leaders held varying views on the precise meaning of accountability. Ollie knew the law implied that eventually someone would be held accountable, and information would become public. "Telling me we need a full report on the failure to comply in a week, or not at all, says a lot about the agency's ethics." Ollie frequently drafted memos directly to the secretary and general counsel. "I am fully prepared to send another memo to the top floor on regulation failures; you know me, I will do it," Ollie asserted.

The Un-Corporation

The unique environment of the federal government created problems for Ollie and other auditors. Ollie told Cameron about the challenges over the last few months conducting the audit. "There's indifference and sometimes resistance to basic accounting practices, requirements that any corporation in America would have to follow," said Ollie. Cameron said, "Tell me more." The room seemed to get smaller for Ollie. "I know what we are doing can seem invasive to some, but it's about institutional integrity and we accountants know about human decision-making ranging from the use of spreadsheets and facts to heuristics or gut feeling. It's the latter that causes organizations to get in trouble. But, I am not here to point the finger despite what some think. Mistakes happen and the faster we figure out failures in the system, the better the organization will be." Cameron knew that any private organization would be happy to have someone as experienced, professional, and calm as Ollie was for determining balance sheet errors.

Willful Ignorance – "Flowered Language"

It was tough for Ollie and company to challenge the status quo, and those members of the organization that understood the legal nature of financial statements ignored warnings to avoid conflict. "One of my auditors was effectively silenced at a meeting because of a correction to the meeting data that did not comport with a director's comments. This same director received a presidential award for that same imprecision," Ollie said, describing a pervasive willful ignorance at DGS. No one at the meeting was willing to speak out against the director's actions.

To correct systemic problems of accountability, Ollie drafted a newsletter for the agency to outline some of the problems, solutions, and recommendations for distribution. "I took time away from other duties to write a succinct letter on the audit process and important information to support. I took it to a senior executive for signature, but this person refused to sign, something about the language needing to be more flowery." Cameron could see where this was going, offering, "I can help with that." Ollie appreciated the support but wanted Cameron to understand the existing culture was not conducive to effective financial accountability at the outset of the audit. "Thank you," said Ollie. "I also sent the draft memo to the office of the general council." Ollie wanted to be sure the right people understood the financial issues at DGS, if and when subsequent investigations were made public.

Us versus Them – On the Wrong Side of Power

Larger problems loomed over the task of government accountability. Ollie described to Cameron the culture of combativeness. "I feel there is an us versus them between the auditors and between managers," Ollie said. Cameron had suspected there would be some pushback, but the infighting between managers was surprising. A story solidified Ollie's claim. "One manager told an auditor in confidence about an accounting error recently, blaming another department

leader for the oversight." Cameron, of course unaware, asked for the details. "Ollie, what's the damage?" Someone lost tens of thousands of dollars, and Cameron was unaware. The cover-up went unnoticed because of some form of cooperation and intentional neglect of accounting standards. Ollie said, "It's not the amount that matters so much as the competition between managers, a reluctance to admit error, and the absence of system safeguards."

Another problem was the unilateral power of senior executives, not for political reasons, but for their own ambition. These political leaders had a unique understanding of the issues or problems at the agencies and sought new directions. "Cameron, the political appointees in some cases are operating outside the policy agenda for self-preservation," said Ollie. This meant that employees at DGS did not do well if they pushed back against senior executive misdirection, citing procedural requirements or technical errors. Cameron's concern about the audit intensified with this news from Ollie. "This isn't anything new, Ollie. And I appreciate your candor."

Senior Executive Pushback

Ollie told Cameron about a particular encounter with a high-ranking SES individual, a seasoned leader who viewed the impending audit with palpable resistance. This SES did not want to be audited and erected invisible walls, attempting to control the very information the auditors needed to scrutinize. He wanted to curate the narrative, to present only a carefully selected view of his command, shielding potential vulnerabilities from external eyes. Ollie, an audit manager, was in a delicate position. The auditors required unrestricted access to all files and processes to form an objective opinion and identify any weaknesses that needed addressing. Ollie understood the SES's perspective—a natural inclination to protect his organization, perhaps even a sense of pride that made scrutiny feel like an unwelcome intrusion.

Drawing upon years of experience, Ollie approached the situation with a blend of firmness and diplomacy, embodying the very principles discussed in Cameron's meeting. A face-to-face meeting was arranged, Ollie accompanied by a senior leader, though it was Ollie who took the lead in the conversation. Calmly and directly, Ollie explained the mandatory nature of the audit, emphasizing that it wasn't a punitive exercise but rather an opportunity for improvement. "The auditors are here to help," Ollie had stressed, a mantra they repeated across DGS. "Their role is to review our processes, identify any deficiencies, and ultimately help us pass this audit." Ollie painted a picture of shared benefit, highlighting how addressing weaknesses, whether in operations, programs, or IT systems, ultimately strengthened the entire organization and contributed to the significant goal DGS had just achieved—passing the full financial statement audit.

Building Bridges

Ollie also acknowledged the SES's concerns, assuring him, "Members of my team will also be there. You'll have some familiar faces around, which I hope will make you more comfortable." The offer to involve the SES's own managers further demonstrated Ollie's commitment to collaboration and respect for his organizational structure. Slowly, patiently, Ollie chipped away at the SES's resistance. By building a rapport, by engaging in calm and reasoned conversation, Ollie managed to shift the SES's perspective. The initial hostility gradually gave way to understanding, and eventually, even a degree of cooperation. In fact, Ollie developed such a strong working relationship with this SES that he preferred to speak directly with Ollie rather than their mutual senior leader, the DGS comptroller.

Ollie's experience served as a reminder to Cameron that effective leadership, whether in policy implementation or audit oversight, hinges on the ability to navigate challenging

interactions. The seemingly dry and objective processes of auditing were, at their core, exercises in building trust and fostering cooperation. Ollie's success in engaging with a resistant SES, much like Lorin's efforts to bridge the gap between policy and practical needs, underscored the vital role of empathy and clear communication in achieving organizational goals, even when faced with inherent skepticism or defensiveness.

Summary

This section of the narrative, drawn from the experiences of Ollie and senior policy advisor Cameron, vividly illustrates the profound complexities of leading an audit within DGS. Their exchange reveals the deeply polarized opinions surrounding government accountability and exposes the practical hurdles Ollie faced in the auditing process.

Ollie's account details the varied viewpoints on compliance and the critical necessity of ethical and moral courage when confronting resistance. It becomes clear that power and authority, often wielded through politically motivated personal agendas, significantly influenced the audit's trajectory. Despite acknowledging the vast differences between the U.S. government and the private financial sector, Ollie consistently emphasizes that core principles of accounting, strong interpersonal connections, and resilient leadership remain indispensable for success. Cameron, departing the discussion, gains a much deeper comprehension of the entrenched fiscal issues within DGS and the divergent views perpetuating them.

The narrative further exposes Ollie's significant challenges in conducting a full financial statement audit. These included a pervasive lack of concern for compliance with the FMFIA, outright resistance to basic accounting practices, and what Ollie candidly describes as a "culture of willful ignorance" regarding financial health. Instances of senior executives actively resisting audits, the necessity of employing "flowered" (diplomatic) language to navigate sensitivities, and

a combative “us versus them” mentality between auditors and managers further complicated the process. Ultimately, Ollie successfully navigated these intricate power dynamics through a deliberate combination of firmness, diplomacy, and strategic relationship-building. These efforts fostered cooperation and ensured the audit’s completion, demonstrating how effective leadership can bridge deep divides.

Beyond the previously established themes of agency-level beliefs and program focus, this segment robustly introduces ideological polarization through power dynamics. Ollie explicitly details how executives and others with significant tenure leveraged their authority and discretion to unilaterally ignore financial problems or avoid compliance. This display of power, stemming from senior positions, served to reinforce different, often conflicting, organizational realities at DGS.

Moreover, this segment distinctly outlines the relational aspects of leadership. Cameron and Ollie’s discussion on creating open dialogue, accepting mutual responsibility for acknowledging differences, and actively maintaining relational integrity exemplifies a proactive approach to mitigating the negative impacts of polarization at the interpersonal level. Their interaction highlights how crucial these relational strategies are for leaders seeking to foster collaboration in environments marked by deep ideological divides.

Homelessness in America: Fall 2022

This narrative section, focusing on two participants, examines the complexities of leading policies on homelessness in America, with Lorin as the central figure in 2022. Through conversations with Cameron, Lorin delves into the drivers behind current policies, differing agency beliefs on approaches, and the evolution of programming efforts and priorities. The eradication of homelessness is a long-standing personal passion for Lorin, a seasoned federal leader at DGS. Despite multiple directorate reorganizations tied to administrative changes, Lorin has maintained an effective program by leveraging strong professional and personal connections within the interagency council on homelessness and through rigorous, collaborative analysis of policy outcomes to inform recommendations to the DGS secretary.

Navigating the intricate machinery of a government agency requires more than just policy expertise; it demands a nuanced understanding of internal dynamics and the delicate art of external collaboration. For Lorin, whose work at DGS placed them at the nexus of these forces, the professional landscape was a constantly evolving terrain. Cameron meets with Lorin at a critical stage of government action. Their discussion describes the inherent challenges of aligning diverse perspectives within a bureaucratic structure and the often contentious interplay between policy ideals and practical constraints as previously seen in previous examples.

Reorganization

Lorin's work involves extensive collaboration, both within DGS and with external stakeholders. Internally, Lorin navigates the challenges of multiple reorganizations and aligning different beliefs and perspectives within the organization, particularly when it comes to policy decisions and guidance. The move of the homeless and neglected delinquent programs to the Office of Safe and Healthy Students and subsequent shifts highlighted the tension between

discretionary and formula grant approaches. The 2019 reorganization, aiming for a functional workgroup structure where "people wouldn't be assigned to programs, you'd be assigned to a workgroup and a principal office component based on a function or skill," ultimately saw Lorin and a colleague move to the Title I office, a transition marked by "culture shock."

Engaging with external stakeholders is a significant aspect of Lorin's role. He coordinates with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and similar councils, often briefing political appointees who may not have deep expertise in these niche populations. He also collaborates with a "very small but mighty advocacy network" of organizations focused on homeless education and youth experiencing homelessness, finding these interactions particularly rewarding due to his academic background and enjoying his interactions with them "as a former academic."

Networks and Councils

Much of Lorin's efforts to combat the shapeshifting teams and workspaces had to do with the use of both formal and informal networks. "We have a mighty advocacy network," said Lorin, "so my connections help with the discontinuities of teams." Many advocates of homelessness worked across agencies and formed an informal network. Lorin worked with colleagues from other agencies focused on housing and labor to develop solutions. They meet to discuss policy and program changes and challenges outside work driven by a passion for their work. "That's great, thank you for what you do," said Cameron, also asking, "how do your advocacy connections overlap and impact your work with councils?" Cameron was referring to the Interagency Council on Homelessness. "Tremendously," said Lorin. "Cameron, you should attend the next one; our discussions help shape how we engage the council. It's the only time we have to engage political appointees without expertise."

These cycles of collaboration, informal and formal discussions on policies and programs, are critical, especially in circumstances when guidance is too broad. In those circumstances, different ideas and interpretations of policy disrupt program execution. Lorin's informal network helps with the problem of vague guidance, but there are limits because of internal and external political pressure. Lorin reminds Cameron that "we do what we can as professionals, but many at DGS are overly cautious, and for different reasons, some in Congress want us to shut down our programs."

Interpreting Policy Guidance

A significant policy shift Lorin has been involved with is the allowance of grant funds to "be used for short-term temporary housing" for homeless children and families, a change spurred by the pandemic. However, this progress exists alongside ongoing challenges, such as the "lack of consensus on the definition of homelessness and who is eligible for assistance." The agency operates with a cautious approach to "minimize risk and prevent misuse of funds," a stance that sometimes clashes with advocates pushing for more liberalized fund usage. Lorin recently discussed this with his boss, Cameron.

"Cameron," Lorin began, leaning slightly forward in their virtual meeting, "I'm concerned about the latest feedback on the temporary housing guidance. The advocates feel it's still too restrictive." Cameron, a seasoned manager with an eye on agency-wide implications, responded, "Lorin, I understand their perspective, but we have to balance that with our responsibility to safeguard these funds. We've seen instances in the past . . ." Cameron trailed off, alluding to previous issues. "But the 'two or three nights' suggestion in our dear colleague

letter," Lorin countered, quoting directly from the guidance, "it feels almost punitive when families are facing real crises. We finally have this flexibility, and we're still being so cautious."

Cameron sighed. "It's a federal system, Lorin. We make recommendations, but we're giving states their options. We can't be perceived as having federal overreach. Plus," Cameron added, his tone shifting slightly, "the front office is very focused on minimizing any potential for fund misuse right now." "I get that," Lorin said, a hint of frustration in his voice. "But sometimes it feels like the pendulum swings too far towards caution. We waited six months for this cleared written response, and the advocates are saying, 'This isn't saying much.'"

Cameron nodded slowly. "It's the nature of the beast, Lorin. Layers of review, different perspectives . . . everyone wants to mitigate risk. Look, I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. Let's see if we can find some opportunities for small wins. Maybe we can highlight some success stories where the temporary housing funds have made a real difference, build some data to support a slightly more flexible approach down the line."

"Navigating the clearance hierarchy for policy documents and technical assistance products can be a lengthy process, often leading to delayed responses where people are like, 'Okay, we waited six months for this. This isn't saying much' and I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm sorry, you know this is the way it goes,'" said Lorin. Despite these bureaucratic hurdles, Lorin expressed the value in direct engagement through presentations, office hours, and webinars, to think aloud a little bit more. Ultimately, Lorin believes that personal commitment and finding opportunities for small wins are key to making a positive impact in the lives of the vulnerable children and youth they serve.

Summary

This part of the narrative highlights the profound challenges of leading within a shifting political landscape, particularly concerning the DGS's approach to homelessness as framed by the McKinney-Vento Act, a federal law that ensures students experiencing homelessness have access to education. Lorin's experiences underscore how diverse interpretations of homelessness policy, combined with the complexities of federal oversight, created significant operational tensions.

Lorin emphasizes the crucial role of both formal and informal networks, such as the Interagency Council on Homelessness, in shaping policy and influencing program changes. A critical point of contention emerged around the very definition of homelessness. This disagreement led to cautious, risk-averse approaches by some agencies, which often clashed with advocates pushing for more flexible and responsive fund usage. The narrative further explores concerns about federal overreach and the inherent difficulties in balancing the diverse needs of multiple stakeholders while striving to implement effective programs. This illustrates a recurring tension between policy ideals and the practical constraints of real-world application.

Fundamentally, this segment centers on the themes of program focus and agency-level beliefs. Regarding program focus, the core issue of interpreting federal policy for local execution dominated discussions on programmatic change. Different interpretations of the McKinney-Vento Act's guidelines on homelessness were directly linked to varied understandings of the complex problems homeless populations face, influencing how resources were allocated and services delivered.

The experience of leadership within this segment, mirroring insights from previous narratives, consistently emphasizes the importance of creating space for dialogue, fostering relational integrity, and accepting responsibility for moments of difference. Lorin's leadership is

exemplified by the strategic use of a policy and program network for efficient information sharing and the thoughtful reconfiguring of internal teams to enhance program efficacy. This proactive approach to collaboration and adaptation demonstrates how leaders can mitigate the disruptive potential of polarized viewpoints and translate abstract policy into tangible, effective action.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Fall 2023

This part of the narrative explores the experiences of three participants facing the difficulties of shaping Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policy and its subsequent integration into agency programs in 2023. Cameron engages with Santana to assess the agency's response to DEI policies. Santana reveals a spectrum of viewpoints on the fundamental ideas of DEI gathered from interactions with peers. Notably, despite interventions from leadership experts and personal discussions, some members of the agency's climate council still experience a sense of disenfranchisement. Adding to this, the conversation addresses the critical issue of inclusion, with reports from within the organization indicating that certain voices are consistently left out of discussions. This dialogue highlights a key reality: While DEI initiatives bring vital attention to the historical challenges of ensuring diverse perspectives are elevated, a considerable gap remains to be bridged.

Cameron served as chair for the human resources advisory council at DGS. The council was established following the new administration to understand the culture at the department and implement DEI policy, which at times required programmatic change. Meetings that focused on DEI were free of tension at the outset, but over time, people became resistant, challenging even the simple ideas within the policy. Cameron began to mentally prepare for meetings. "I kept telling myself that I will win everyone over on basic concepts and take it from there." The task of leading through groundbreaking policy is always difficult, thought Cameron.

A Mindful Environment

As DEI policies were implemented at the program level, challenges ensued, despite the intended goal of creating a mindful and safe work environment. Santana described an incident responding to clashes inside and outside meetings: “I consoled crying subordinates because they didn’t realize the different ways their words could be interpreted as offensive.” Cameron understood that employees across DGS communicated their understanding of DEI in various ways. Some pushed back on the idea of DEI, while others, in this case, embraced it to the level of directly reporting violations. “I was shocked when I found out the offense, something I could hear myself saying, but the violator went through counseling sessions and took courses on inclusion, which I think was something that made this person better, but it was tough for them. I don’t think they fully understood the problem and, of course, were not able to fully engage with the person that reported them.”

Getting Everyone to the Table

Cameron did not ask for the full details of the triggering, but instead wanted to know other ways the DEI program focus influences interpersonal exchanges. “I appreciated this story. How else has the focus on DEI impacted interactions?” Santana paused and then offered two more examples. The first example considered an exchange between peers at a meeting of different agencies where some members of the team did not feel welcomed discussing specific issues. “There were colleagues of mine, Chinese Americans, that did not feel comfortable in the room when we were discussing topics on China. Apparently, before I arrived, some of their peers forced them to the table. While some did notice, others were more conscious of who is at the table.” Cameron seemed to take more notice of table dynamics since policy implementation started, so this event was interesting. Shifting in the seat, Cameron said, “People seem to have

courage for changing programs in different ways, reporting to common sense team etiquette. I did not see this coming."

Return on DEI Investments

Santana described the pressure and process of communicating the returns on DEI implementation for programs. "It takes a team to fully articulate the return on investment for DEI policies." "Why is that?" Cameron asked. "Well, there are many in the organization that don't agree, as I mentioned earlier, and so we have to make sure we provide the big picture through the best analysis of our reporting systems." Santana worked with human resources as part of the recruiting committee for DGS. "You should come to our next meeting, Cameron," said Santana. "The analysts that put together reports on diversity are sometimes viewed as nonexperts, but they are and often alter views after they present the evidence." Cameron thought the assumptions about the work of diversity and pressure to present value must have been difficult. "What kinds of evidence?" "Who recruits for DGS mattered just as much as where we recruit for DGS. We were sending white middle-class men to mainly Hispanic areas, so we changed with more people of color and saw an immediate increase of five and ten percent. We can't say with one hundred percent confidence that change caused the increase, but the correlation is strong. At the end of the day, leaders like homogeneity for simplicity, so there is always going to be pushback on change that creates complexity."

A Different Perspective on DEI

Santana, a longtime subordinate of Cameron's, worked on the policy and the subsequent programmatic focus. DEI was challenging because implementation changed the status quo through rebalancing historical inequities of power across race and gender at the agency. Santana reflected: "Cameron, a lot of white males have felt like this climate and culture advisory council,

or the [DEI] initiatives are excluding them." Cameron understood the demographics at DGS (predominantly white and male) and how a policy changing the structure could be viewed as destructive. Santana also described efforts to engage colleagues through advisory council meetings, a great place for open dialogue.

One gentleman felt very strongly that the policy was exclusionary in form despite having an outside expert speak about DEI in the context of leadership. This member of the group would say: "If this whole idea is to make everyone feel included, why do I feel excluded?" Santana was perplexed about the entire episode: "When we're talking about diversity, it is diversity that is inclusive of everyone, right? Like that the inclusion and the belonging that, that is there is for, for all of us and that we are not the intent of this council is not to exclude any group of people, right? And that everybody's in the diversity of thought, that perspective that everybody brings to the table is, is welcomed, right?"

Cameron took note of this difference in perspective and valued Santana's full disclosure of values and beliefs. "Clearly, Santana put forth the effort and perhaps created a starting point for listening and learning, bringing outside voices to co-construct meaning where ideas clashed, thought Cameron. Santana also considered her bias: "I mean, I guess as a Black woman, I'm used to being in spaces where I'm not necessarily always accepted. But it was very interesting to hear kind of the white male perspective. This idea that white men are feeling like us introducing this thing is an effort to exclude them from the group is a shocking one for me."

Santana's point was interesting to Cameron because of the clash of ideas, values, beliefs, and the apparent need to reflect before and after dialogue. "I appreciate you telling me this information," said Cameron, wondering how many others were privy. Santana was unclear of her success leading DEI policy implementation, but she was able to exchange ideas with resistant

team members, which suggested progress. Cameron concluded the meeting, applauding Santana's efforts.

Summary

This part of the narrative explores the experiences of three participants grappling with the complexities of shaping DEI policy and its subsequent integration into agency programs. Their accounts illuminate the persistent challenges of ideological polarization as it manifests within an organization striving for greater equity.

Cameron's engagement with Santana to assess the agency's response to DEI initiatives reveals a wide spectrum of viewpoints on the fundamental ideas of DEI. Santana's interactions with peers expose the deep divisions, highlighting a core aspect of polarization: differing interpretations of concepts that, on the surface, seem universally positive. Notably, despite interventions from leadership experts and personal discussions aimed at fostering understanding, some members of the agency's climate council continue to experience a profound sense of disenfranchisement. This points directly to the challenges of inclusive leadership in creating environments where all voices feel heard and valued, even when there are fundamental disagreements.

Adding to the complexity of the conversation is the critical issue of inclusion, with internal organizational reports indicating that certain voices are consistently marginalized in discussions. This reinforces the reality that while Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives correctly draw vital attention to the historical challenges of elevating diverse perspectives, the gap between the aspiration of these programs and the actual lived experience of employees remains considerable. This gap is often exacerbated by underlying polarization regarding the very nature and necessity of DEI efforts.

The narrative illustrates that Cameron's implementation of DEI policy within the DGS, spearheaded by Cameron, was met with significant challenges, directly reflecting the agency-level beliefs and program focus themes identified earlier. Santana's account reveals that even after expert consultations, some within the agency felt excluded by DEI initiatives. This paradox, where initiatives designed for inclusion inadvertently led to new forms of exclusion, is a potent manifestation of ideological polarization in practice. There are reports of employees feeling unable to express their views for fear of reprisal, and instances where well-intentioned speech is perceived as offensive, leading to disciplinary action. This underscores how deeply personal and emotionally charged these topics are, contributing to a climate where open dialogue, a hallmark of effective leadership, becomes exceptionally difficult.

The narrative also emphasizes the difficulty in demonstrating the tangible value of DEI. While recruitment strategy adjustments—such as sending more people of color to recruit in predominantly Hispanic areas—showed a correlation with a 5-10% increase in diverse hires, this data alone could not overcome the underlying resistance. Ultimately, this section underscores that while DEI is crucial for addressing historical inequities and promoting diverse viewpoints, its implementation was significantly challenged due to polarization stemming from concerns about exclusion and differing interpretations of its very purpose and methods. The various leadership approaches attempted, from expert intervention to structural adjustments, to highlight the persistent need for nuanced strategies in highly contested areas of organizational change.

Human Rights – War in Gaza: Fall 2024

This narrative section, a composite of three participants, focuses on civilian harm reporting in 2024. Told from the perspective of Merit, an expert on the Middle East conflict, the central issue is how and when to report findings to an administration facing public pressure. Cameron and Merit discuss the polarized views between Merit's team and another directorate with conflicting information on the conflict, to determine potential adjustments to U.S. policy and programs, particularly during a general election year.

Extreme differences of opinion, understanding of the conflict, and divergent realities reached a boiling point with the start of the war in Gaza. A close ally of Israel, the administration needed to provide answers to the public during an election year. For Cameron at DGS, this meant reaching out to someone for understanding the conflict and ultimately advising the secretary for DGS. "I am extremely thankful to know someone with experience in the region at our department. Someone I can engage in open discussion," Cameron reported thinking during the first meeting with Merit. Following acceptance into a fellowship program, Merit was quickly elevated on the general schedule at DGS, quickly rising to the position of director of international programs. Cameron viewed Merit as one of the brightest civil servants in the federal government.

Cameron asked about Merit's overall thoughts on the conflict following a directive from the administration to produce a report on the conflict: "How do you understand the war and what is DGS missing in terms of preparing the administration to make policy decisions?" Merit was pleased with the attention and pace of action to respond to concerns of civilian harm in Gaza, but the outlook was bleak. "I think there's so much conflicting information that could influence policymakers and send the U.S. in the wrong direction on the war." The discussion between

Cameron and Merit focused on civilian deaths during the war between Israel and Hamas, a military and political organization in Gaza. Since the October 7th invasion of Israel by Hamas groups, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) relentlessly sought to capture or kill those responsible for the deaths of over a thousand Israelis. The IDF's efforts involved a full-scale military employment and use of mass casualty weapons.

"Truth Tellers"

Merit's years of study on the region were no match for either politics or conviction. The opposition party continued to spread false rumors about the conflict in Gaza to elevate their political status for the upcoming general election. Cameron could hear the frustration in Merit's voice, given some time to think about the issue and task. "We've had ideological differences, people so sure and confident despite the people there to help them," said Merit. The number of voices on the issue surged, drowning out people like Merit. Cameron considered the futility of their efforts. "I know, it's an election year, so we have to be fast and accurate, and hope our recommendations are actually considered and not just an exercise," said Cameron. Merit was glad to hear this from Cameron, adding, "We have to report the facts, we need to be truth tellers." Merit meant the results of any analysis should be handed over to the administration regardless of whether it supported the existing narrative or not. There were others at DGS who disagreed with this approach, deciding that information should be filtered.

Public Pressure and Protests

The protests spread like wildfire, especially at premier universities like Columbia, which were televised nationally. Cameron admitted to Merit, "I have never seen anything happen as fast as the protests on college campuses, which of course is going to put pressure on the administration's policies, so here we are. How does DGS best support the administration given

these developments?" The political stakes were higher now. For Merit, the process of educating his team, colleagues, and superiors was constant as the policy supporting Israel evolved. "I think it's important to consistently ensure our colleagues understand both domestic and international laws, that human rights are always considered in whatever we do moving forward." Cameron felt a clash coming, knowing that Merit would not back down if the administration challenged a report from DGS. But there were people inside DGS and at other agencies with professional agendas between Merit, Cameron, and a full report reaching the administration. Conflict ensued.

Internal Pressure

Political and professional agendas of appointed leaders at DGS often had complementary effects based on Merit's experience. Therefore, when the policies began to change, some agency leaders had to make decisions about their professional futures. Merit explained, "We can see the policy evolving on the war in Gaza, which means people at the top are going to make choices, and often their professional agendas are going to emerge." Cameron offered, "Well, we know these people, so maybe we consider your point when constructing the report." There were also political appointees that felt the administration was limiting their authority and abilities to communicate on the issues. Merit countered Cameron, "I know a few appointees resentful of the current policy. They feel their hands are tied. It would be great to engage those individuals." Cameron appreciated this idea, "Great point. I think we should. Sometimes DGS has a habit of bending to the will of organizational leaders."

Embracing Dissent

Merit flipped the challenge of dialogue, with competing understandings of reality, on its head through welcoming disagreement. "I welcome constructive disagreement because there's always something I could have missed in the research conducted by me or the team." Merit also

told Cameron the right people need to be at the table for discussions, which usually meant attorneys. “It’s difficult to do, but we need to make sure those that need to know about pending recommendations at DGS for the White House are at the table,” Merit said. Cameron asked, “When do you think a full recommendation will be ready for the DGS secretary and what would that look like?” Merit responded quickly, “We are actually split on the report despite our deliberate work, which is not bad, but it means the information you receive will have two different perspectives.” Cameron understood and looked forward to reviewing the documents, politely saying, “Thanks, Merit, I really appreciate your work and leadership on this rare ask.”

Agency Perception and Collaboration

Effective interaction with peer agencies is crucial, as policies and programs often span multiple federal entities. Merit emphasized this collaborative skill within the evolving landscape. This was a noteworthy point for Cameron, who had been removed from direct engagement with analysts outside DGS for years. “When we face pushback on our analysis and recommendations,” Cameron noted, “I recognize it as a desire to understand our operational approach, often stemming from ideological differences or interagency perceptions.” Recalling early conservative views of DGS, Cameron asked, “So, what is the current perception of DGS?” Merit responded tersely, “Trust me, you don’t want to know,” and continued, “My point is, effective liaison work also involves understanding how our agency is seen.”

Summary

In a politically charged environment, where public outcry over civilian harm in the Gaza conflict converged with an impending general election, this narrative segment critically highlights the indispensable role of truth-telling within government. The exchange between Merit and Cameron powerfully illustrates how ideological polarization can permeate an agency,

creating internal pressures, conflicting information flows, and the pervasive influence of political agendas.

Merit's unwavering insistence on presenting unfiltered facts, even when those facts challenged the prevailing narrative or internal preferences, clearly positions him as a vital "truth teller." This action directly embodies a critical leadership aspect: the courage to prioritize objective reality over comfort or political expediency. Cameron's eventual appreciation for Merit's principled approach and his growing recognition of DGS's potential to be swayed by senior leadership's external pressures, suggests an evolving understanding of the ethical imperative to prioritize accuracy. This demonstrates a nuanced dimension of leadership in polarization: the ability to influence and shift perspectives, even within a hierarchical structure.

Ultimately, this section highlights that navigating polarizing issues under intense public scrutiny demands not only expertise and collaboration, but also the courage to embrace dissent and present a comprehensive, albeit potentially divided, assessment to inform policy decisions. This speaks to the leadership aspect of fostering open dialogue and creating a safe space for diverse, even uncomfortable, truths to emerge.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the findings on the experiences of career federal leaders within the fictitious DGS. Through composite narratives, the chapter illuminates the pervasive influence of ideological polarization within a federal agency. The narrative also highlights the multifaceted leadership experience of leadership in the process of mitigating the effects of polarization. Participant data describing leadership experiences strongly supports the previous relational leadership research by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011).

The chapter specifically isolates the data and foregrounds the discussion on how deeply embedded agency-level beliefs and contested program focus areas contribute to internal divisions. Furthermore, the dynamics of power and interpersonal interactions all added to the experience of polarization within DGS. While the experiences of ideological polarization are illustrated through composite narrative, the data or core narrative stories derive from thematic coding. The experience of ideological polarization as described throughout the narrative corresponds to the establishment of four dimensions described by participants (see table 8).

Table 8: Dimensions of Ideological Polarization

Dimension	Description
Agency Level Beliefs	Divergence (multiple realities) on emergent policy implementation and/or change.
Program Focus	Divergence (multiple realities) on program implantation change.
Power Dynamics	Top-down or bottom-up tension on the topic of policy or programs expressed through use of authority or expertise as leverage.
Interpersonal Dynamics	Divergent views on social issues, which may not relate to ongoing policy or program change or implementation.

Note. Author original.

The first composite narrative, "Leading in the Federal Government," establishes the critical context of ideological polarization within DGS. This narrative highlights the significance of the leader context, particularly in understanding how process-oriented leaders navigate situations where employee actions, such as a Hatch Act violation or remote work policy abuse, directly challenge established agency standards. These moments described across subsequent parts of the composite narrative are examples of intense agency-level divergence on emerging

change. Crucially, this segment introduces how divergent views and beliefs, especially when espoused by those in positions of authority, manifest as clear power dynamics.

Building on this foundational understanding, the subsequent narrative, “Pandemic Polarization,” details the proactive responses of leaders such as Pacey and Cameron. This narrative powerfully underscores the critical leadership imperative of maintaining open dialogue and facilitating perspective-sharing amidst profound disagreements. It vividly showcases leadership’s essential role in appealing for patience during investigations and upholding organizational integrity, even when confronted with fundamental differences in the interpretation of rules and individual rights. These findings resonate strongly with previous research by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) (see table 9).

Table 9: Relational Leadership Practices

Category	Description
Open Dialogue	Conversations in which pre-judgements are not made but opportunities are created for knowing "who you are and…who we are"
Scenic Moments	Shape a Context for Working out differences and creating a path through the organizational landscape
Noticing Differences	Being responsive to the interplay of unifying and dispersing forces unfolding in conversations by engaging in dialogue that questioning, challenging, answering, extending and agreeing
Sensing and Responding	Present moment by looking, listening and anticipating
Relational Integrity	respecting and being responsive to differences, being accountable to others, acting in ways that others can count on us, and being able to explain our decisions and actions to others and ourselves

Note. Adapted from Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011.

The third narrative, “Clean Energy,” further explores the tension between high-level administrative goals and the practical realities of implementation. Focusing on initiatives like electric vehicle mandates and workspace maximization, this section highlights how agency-level beliefs and struggles over program focus become battlegrounds for reconciling top-down directives with bottom-up realities. Hildred’s efforts to establish “guardrails” demonstrate a leadership approach aimed at managing these tensions and ensuring multivoiced solutions, exposing the intricate interpersonal dynamics of polarization in organizational change.

“Government Accountability” delves into the complexities of government accountability through the lens of a DGS audit. This segment vividly illustrates ideological polarization surrounding compliance and reveals how power and authority are wielded to resist change, sometimes fostering a “culture of willful ignorance.” Ollie’s success in navigating these challenges through firmness, diplomacy, and relationship-building exemplifies crucial leadership aspects in overcoming entrenched resistance and fostering cooperation.

“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” confronts the intense ideological polarization surrounding DEI policy. This narrative exposes the deep divisions over the very definition and implementation of DEI, where initiatives intended for inclusion paradoxically lead to new forms of exclusion. It highlights the challenges for inclusive leadership in creating environments where all voices feel heard, even amidst fundamental disagreements.

Finally, “Human Rights – War in Gaza” concludes the narrative findings by examining the ultimate test of leadership in an intensely polarized context. In this segment, the public outcry over the Gaza conflict directly collides with internal pressures and political agendas. Merit’s unwavering insistence on objective reporting, even when facts are uncomfortable, positions him as a vital “truth teller.” This highlights the leadership aspect of courageously prioritizing

accuracy over expediency and the profound ethical imperative of transparent communication. Cameron's evolving understanding of this principle underscores the leadership capacity for growth and adaptation in navigating external pressures and internal biases. This culminating narrative powerfully synthesizes how ideological polarization manifests across agency-level beliefs, program focus (as it pertains to information dissemination), power dynamics, and interpersonal dynamics, ultimately demanding leadership that can foster dissent, ensure comprehensive assessments, and uphold truth for informed policy decisions and public trust.

In sum, this chapter's composite narratives illustrate that ideological polarization is not just an external political phenomenon but is deeply embedded within the fabric of a federal agency, manifesting across various dimensions. Leadership, as described by the participants, is consistently characterized by efforts to foster dialogue, bridge diverse perspectives, navigate complex power dynamics, and uphold ethical integrity to drive change amidst profound internal divisions, even in the face of intense external scrutiny and geopolitical pressures.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

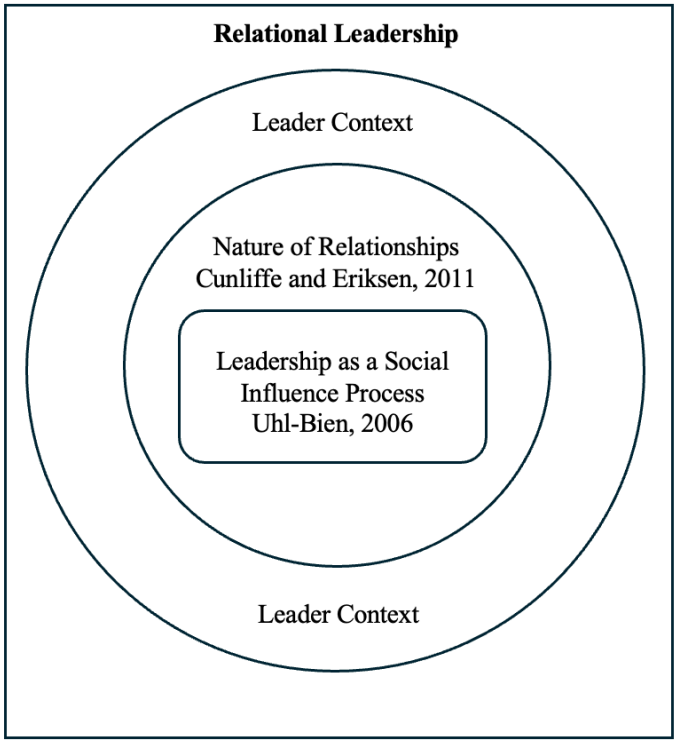
This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of career federal leaders regarding ideological polarization within their roles at agencies in the NCR and their experience of leadership within this context. To this end, the study was guided by the following initial research question: How do career federal leaders describe ideological polarization? The second research question evolved based on the study's emergent findings. While initially focused on identifying best leadership practices, it shifted to explore the leadership experience itself. Consequently, the study addressed the following research question: What are the leadership experiences of career federal leaders in the context of ideological polarization? It is a generally accepted practice in exploratory qualitative research to have responsive research questions that evolve with the data.

This chapter opens with a discussion of the conceptual framework underpinning the study. Relational leadership research and key concepts describing the leader's context within ideological polarization provide the lens for understanding the findings. The discussion section is structured around two sets of themes derived from thematic coding, organized according to the research questions. The discussion of each theme incorporates illustrative excerpts from the composite narrative and links to relevant existing literature. The chapter concludes by offering two overarching conclusions that synthesize the findings and literature, as well as outlining implications for theory, future research, and practical application.

Conceptual Framework

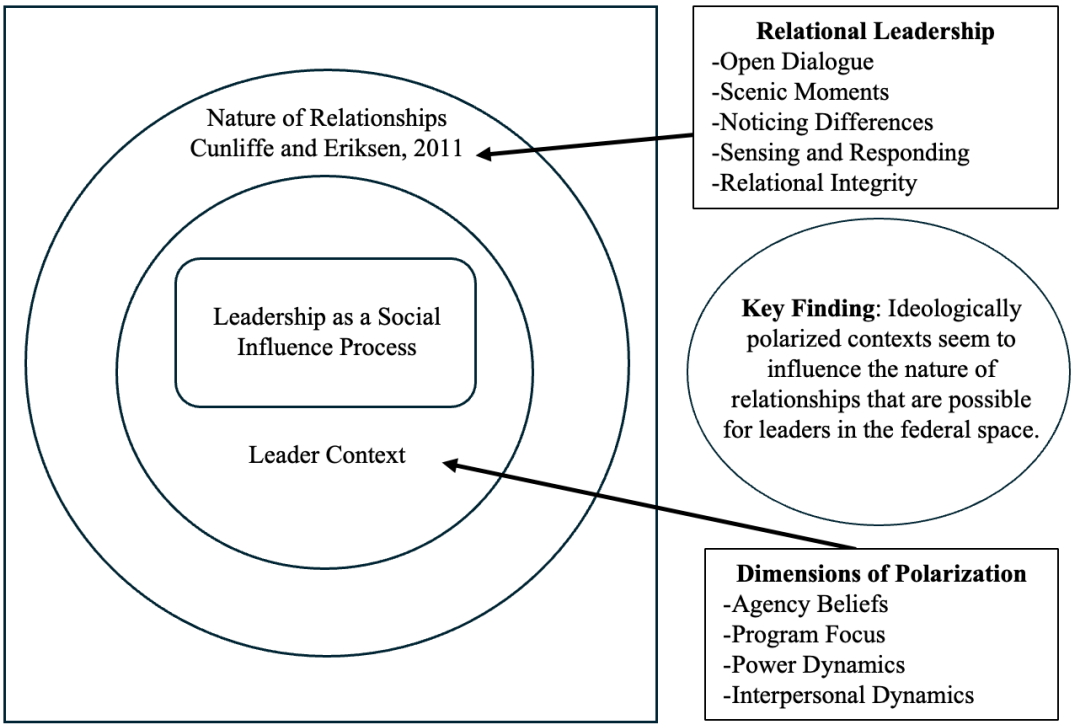
The conceptual framework guiding this study, consisting of relational leadership and leader context, was well suited for examining the experiences of career field leaders due to its focus on the co-construction of reality amidst opposing viewpoints (see Figure 6). Uhl-Bien (2006) establishes the ontological foundation by contrasting individual-centric ("entity") and interaction-focused ("relational") perspectives on leadership, highlighting the emergence of shared meaning, mutual influence, and co-created realities from relationships. Expanding on this, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), drawing from a study of federal security leaders, introduced epistemological dimensions with the concept of "being-in-relation," emphasizing the dialogic and heteroglossic nature of leader engagement and the importance of deep, authentic interaction, active listening, and valuing diverse perspectives in collective meaning-making.

Figure 6: Original Conceptual Framework



The study's findings necessitated a modification of the conceptual framework (see Figure 7). A key refinement involved repositioning the nature of relationships to the outer ring of the framework because of the critical influence of the ideologically polarized context. This shift reflects the more prominent and pervasive experience of ideological polarization, which emerged thematically as distinct dimensions within the data. As found in this study, the context of ideological polarization shaped the potential for leadership, and consequently the findings suggest that ideologically polarized contexts have a much greater impact on leadership than previously understood (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Four specific dimensions of ideological polarization were found: Agency Beliefs, Program Focus, Power Dynamics, and Interpersonal Dynamics. Drawing on Jost et al. (2022), we defined ideological polarization as significant divisions in beliefs, opinions, and values. This conceptualization aligns with traditional understandings highlighted by Fiorina and Abrams (2008) and Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), offering a crucial lens through which to comprehend the unique challenges encountered by career federal leaders in contemporary times.

Figure 7: Modified Conceptual Framework



Discussion of the Findings

The following discussion delves into the two categories, themes derived directly from participant experiences, as vividly portrayed in the preceding composite narratives. The first theme highlights that career federal leaders describe their experiences of ideological polarization along four distinct dimensions. These dimensions are:

- Agency-level beliefs: Divergence (multiple realities) on emergent policy implementation and/or change
- Program focus: Divergence (multiple realities) on program implantation change
- Power dynamics: Top-down or bottom-up tension on the topic of policy or programs expressed through use of authority or expertise as leverage

- Interpersonal dynamics: Divergent views on social issues, which may not relate to ongoing policy or program change or implementation

These dimensions offer a critical framework for comprehending the multilayered impact of ideological divides on the professional realities of federal leaders.

The second category centers on the ways in which the participants experienced leadership in the context of polarization. Career federal leaders described the relational components of leadership largely aligning with previous research by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011). That is, participants depicted leadership as fundamentally relationally based, characterized by integrity and dialogical-focused interactions when perceptions of reality diverged. An explanation of how they used open dialogue, scenic moments, noticing differences, and sensed, responded, and practiced relational integrity will be explained in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Experiencing Ideological Polarization

As previously noted, career federal leaders in this study described experiencing ideological polarization across four dimensions: Agency-Level Beliefs, Program Focus, Power Dynamics, and Interpersonal Dynamics. The following sections explore each dimension, in concert with supporting scholarship and quotes from the composite narrative.

Dimension 1: Agency-Level Beliefs

Agency-level beliefs pertain to broad disagreement on emergent policy, development, and implementation. Aligning with Goodsell's (2015) concept of a "belief system" as interconnected "value commitments" (p. 38), agency-level beliefs reflect the perceived importance of the overall mission, fostering "institutional charisma" that cultivates workforce devotion and public trust (p. 38). Significant policy shifts can create incongruence with these

belief systems or the existing reality, as illustrated by the clean energy policy's mismatch with infrastructure limitations in this study.

Divergent views on major policies such as clean energy, DEI, and government accountability, as illustrated in the composite narrative, exemplify the agency-level belief dimension. Merit, Santana, Avery, Ollie, and Hildred, representing multiple participants, described encountering conflict at the agency level when policy perspectives differed. Participants like Merit consistently emphasized ensuring colleagues "understood the law" during agency change. The war in Gaza provided a stark example of divergent policy thinking. Additionally, Avery and others recounted the challenges of integrating new political appointees and senior executives, individuals sometimes arriving with assumptions drastically different from the agency's reality, akin to the perspective of a "senator, congressman, or governor." While agency leaders set the organizational tone, Avery's experience highlights the constraints of reality.

Santana and Ollie, embodying other participants' experiences, also described agency-level disagreements on issues like DEI and government accountability. For Santana, understanding opposing viewpoints on DEI, notably concerns about "white male exclusion," permeated conversations from policy development to implementation, a dynamic depicted in the narrative through leadership consultant visits. Participants also described using data to counter agency-wide differences on DEI by demonstrating a clear return on investment. Ollie's experiences further exemplified agency-level divergence and difficulties in implementing certain accounting practices for transparency, reflecting disagreement with the "actual existence of the program" and stemming from differing understandings of government accountability, ultimately leading to varied opinions on program viability and fiscal problems.

Finally, Hildred offered a quintessential example of this dimension with the description of divergent views on an aggressive mandate for clean energy. This mandate impacted multiple aspects across agencies, from office space to transportation. Colleagues in various agencies expressed confusion regarding the mismatch between "aggressive targets," the existing infrastructure, and the lack of corresponding funding from the administration. This polarization surrounding agency-level beliefs—the divergent views on major policy initiatives—presents a considerable challenge for career federal leaders. Consequently, participant stories concerning clean energy, DEI, government accountability, and human rights formed the core threads of the composite narrative for the study findings.

Dimension 2: Program Focus

Program focus involves differing views (and realities) on program modifications driven by new guidance from the administration, Congress, or the courts (Biggs & Helms, 2014), as well as program assessments. This divergence was particularly evident in participants' experiences with DEI implementation, perceptions of inclusion, recruiting, and employee retention. The second dimension of participant experiences with ideological polarization is programmatic focus, also referred to as program conflict. Characters in the composite narrative such as Lorin, Ollie, and Pacey embody participant experiences with divergent views on program direction and changes. For Lorin, the potential closure of a directorate and partisan divisions on programs in Congress created a constantly shifting environment of reorganizations and staff reductions. Despite internal and external pressures to end Lorin's work on homelessness, the legal authorizations from Congress ensured the program's continuation—demonstrating how programs endure until legislative changes occur, irrespective of differing opinions.

Ollie and other participants described difficulties and disagreements regarding fundamental program evaluation practices. In Ollie's case, the conflict centered on differing approaches to conducting a financial review of a program for government accountability purposes. Ollie's colleagues, influenced by senior executives, challenged the necessity of routine program reviews and updates to identify potential shortcomings. Federal leaders bear responsibility for program transparency aligned with policy, a challenge echoed by participants implementing DEI who focused on "articulating return on investment" to justify programmatic changes.

Study participant Pacey detailed a challenging experience with team members who prioritized remote work over the requirement to use secure government equipment in person. While many government roles could be performed remotely, Pacey's position necessitated in-person work due to security protocols. However, some colleagues resisted returning to the office based on their views of post-pandemic work arrangements. Pacey faced difficulties collaborating with a colleague who refused to come into the building while simultaneously "defending the program," despite acknowledging the inappropriateness of their remote work arrangement for the required tasks.

Programs represent the why and what of policymaking according to Biggs and Helms (2014). They have clearly stated goals and sets of specific, observable, and measurable outcomes (Biggs & Helms, 2014). Ideally, programs are aligned with specific agencies; this is not always the case, as described by study participants who worked across multiple agencies as part of their programmatic duties. Things get more complicated when policy moves faster than programs, so this explains Lorin's experience of whipsaw-like change in the form of program reorganization supporting homelessness and why programmatic focus (program conflict) creates space for

divergent views on how changes should be implemented in line with new policies. This aligns with participant experience with the use of data to illustrate returns on investments or measurable outcomes (Biggs & Helms, 2014).

Biggs and Helms (2014) argue that, like policymaking, the process of program design includes multiple groups such as legislators, executives, bureaucrats, and even judges historically. However, they go on to note that modern program design has limited involvement to agency leaders and program managers. Even with this smaller group of interests involved in the process, there is still room for differing beliefs on how programs should function. Participant Pacey described the most intense problem with changes to how programs functioned following the pandemic, with some seeking to remain remote workers despite the need to use government systems on site. Experiencing polarization at the program level presents a unique set of challenges given the evolving design, interplay of interests, and measurable outcomes subject to evaluation.

Dimension 3: Power Dynamics (Hierarchical)

Power dynamics refer to the top-down or bottom-up exchanges where policy and program disagreements emerged among career federal leaders. This concept aligns with Goodsell's (2015) analysis of government power, highlighting the traditional view of control through hierarchy and rules, while also acknowledging power dynamics across agencies through strategies like procrastination and policy disruption.

Participants described in detail how power worked in their agencies, noting its usage and pursuit superseding political agenda. Examples were both top-down and bottom-up, which is consistent with Goodsell (2015). Ollie offered an example of pressure to modify a report on the agency's financials with the use of "flowery language" because the existing findings might hurt

the professional outlook for a senior executive and political appointee. Participants responsible for government accountability also described other executives abstaining from requirements to release their tax information in compliance with federal regulations. The senior executive's comments - "Can't we just show them what we want?" - required Ollie's resolve given the mismatch of authority and responsibility in the agency. Participants such as Hildred also responded to the use of power by political appointees from the administration "calling down to agencies" for the status of clean energy "target data."

Conversely, the use of power flowed upward with participants describing the use of their autonomy and individual agency in the face of senior executives and political appointees, as demonstrated in Avery's attempt to access government data because of political connections, but without official capacity and certainly without a need to know. Avery's response of "I understand, but here's what the regulation states" offers a window into an incredible level of courage, professionalism, and duty.

Alvesson's (2012) model of organizational culture involving language, stories, and rituals offers some explanation for the inculcated use of power to bend reality in federal agencies. In this case, participants in this study are describing the critical role language and ritual play in shaping behaviors at agencies. While Alvesson argues for the example of slogans, in the case of Reese and Ollie, it's the way power is implied through the ask. Comments like "flowery language" take the edge off asking someone to lie or withhold the truth, while arguments such as "Can't we just show them what we want?" press lower-ranking officials to aim for an instant accomplice. Finally, the requests by senior officials on both accounts suggest ritualistic behavior and prior compliance.

Dimension 4: Interpersonal Dynamics (Peer to Peer)

The interpersonal dimension of ideological polarization concerns peer conflicts stemming from differing viewpoints on social issues, which may or may not be directly related to agency work. These interactions on politicized topics influence career federal leaders' collaborative approaches.

Like participant descriptions of power dynamics, interpersonal dynamics involve both policy and program topics, but are limited to peer-to-peer interactions. Participants such as Ariel described conflict over DEI policies with a peer leading to a formal report, this despite prior assumptions of "ideological alignment." Ariel's confusion regarding a colleague's ideological stance aligns with group theory research where members typically fall in line with group expectations (Hornsey, 2008; Turner & Haslam, 1991). However, compliance is not always guaranteed as we observed with Santana, an embodiment of multiple participants, seeking to get "everyone to the table" for all voices to be heard. An example of this in the study involved reluctant in-group members and colleagues of Santana not seeking to integrate new group members that happened to be of Asian descent in a discussion on China (Turner et al., 1987).

Jost and Amodio (2012) argued that ideology is a powerful motivation force, which suggests how conflict occurs among peers at federal agencies as described by the participants in this study. Also, there are different levels of ideology beginning with core beliefs on reality leading to the left-right or liberal-conservative scales (Ostrowski, 2022). Therefore, even with a direct engagement, as described by participants for understanding divergent views on issues, proximate and underlying causes of ideological conflict mingle. Despite this problem, career federal leaders demonstrated a willingness to work through interpersonal dynamics.

Leadership in the Context of Polarization

The following sections discuss the second category of themes, namely, leadership experiences in the context of ideological polarization. As illustrated in the composite narrative, in the context of ideological polarization experiences of leadership were relationally-responsive, integrity-based, and dialogical (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Put more simply, participants revealed leadership as being in relation to others and based on dialogue.

Open Dialogue

The relational perspective leads to the primacy of relations and communication for the social construction of leadership according to Uhl-Bien (2006). This means dialogue is critical for relational dynamics and the unifying framework for relational leadership as described earlier in the conceptual framework. Recall that a relational perspective focuses on the co-construction of reality and the collective while an entity perspective focuses on independent and bounded realities (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) agree that dialogue presents an opportunity for co-construction and collective understanding, but argue that conversations must provide openings for all to participant. They also note the relational leader must not view communication as "an expression of something pre-conceived, but emerging and open" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1434). In this way, relational leaders influence a "living conversation" and approach communication with an understanding of "dialogism," which means speaking with and not to people (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1434).

Study participants described several examples of leadership through open dialogue. Hildred, Santana, Merit and Lorin, key characters in the composite narratives, each offered experiences when they worked through polarization speaking with others to co-construct a

shared reality. Hildred described a series of engagements with agency members questioning the feasibility and merit of an aggressive clean energy policy, revealing personal reservations in the process. Only after integrating veterans and interns at DGS did Hildred reach a solution for policy implementation, a clear example of dialogism. Santana and Merit described similar circumstances, engaging colleagues who pushed back against ideas of inclusion and conflicting information on human rights in Gaza, respectively.

Moments of Difference

From an entity or individual leader perspective, Uhl-Bien's research considers behaviors and skills such as recognizing moments of difference, but only as part of a deeper focus on leadership as an outcome (Fletcher et al., 2012). A relational leader would understand the responsibility for seeing and addressing moments of difference, especially in the context of emergent coordination or evolving social order (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that experiencing relational readership goes beyond inviting dialogue by also requiring the recognition of movements of difference. They described this behavior as "noticing being responsive to unifying and dispersing forces unfolding in conversation," (p. 1444) which includes Bakhtin's (1984) work regarding "questioning, challenging, answering, extending, and agreeing" (p. 285). This is an example of an entity and relational perspective overlapping.

The participants in this study described responding to moments of difference. They displayed courage and commitment to their professional standards and organizational mission. Ollie, Avery, and Santana offered direct examples of challenging differences in the workplace. Ollie felt the need to "be that individual that was always engaged," while Avery displayed the fortitude to challenge peers and senior executives exploring goals without the appropriate

authorities or “avenues they thought were the correct way” only to end up back where they started.

Santana described confronting peers who did not fully welcome all members of the group: “We all have the same [security] clearances,” suggesting there should be no differences in how we communicate in the same classified government spaces. Each of these participants understood their responsibilities and engaged their peers and organizational leaders during moments of difference in the form of questions, confrontational statements, and procedural points of order based on experience.

Creating Scenic Moments

While recognizing moments of difference is important to leading relationally, the participants in this study also created opportunities for working out differences. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) referred to entity-based ideas with relational leadership outcomes as “creating scenic moments” (p. 1444). The idea here is to orchestrate moments for working out differences throughout the organization, so members can recognize and respond to differences. In other words, creating scenic moments represents the antecedent to recognizing and addressing moments of difference.

For Uhl-Bien (2006), leaders that create scenic moments understand “relational dynamics” and how “relationships form and develop in the workplace,” both of which required further examination as of that writing (p. 672). At the time of her research on the concepts supporting relational leadership, Uhl-Bien (2006) argued for future studies to go beyond the dyadic and leader-follower relationships. To that end, the leaders in this study describe an environment critically dependent on multidirectional and geographically (cross-agency) dispersed relationships as an outcome given the interdependent nature of federal organizations.

Participants Rorie, Hildred, and Santana, as described in their respective narratives, created spaces for recognizing differences. Understanding relational dynamics (Uhl-Bien, 2006), Rorie created opportunities to understand members of his organization, adding: "I've made time getting to know the realities of the businesses of the people that I am working with, building relationships to get what we need to accomplish our mission". Similarly, Santana revealed the most vivid example of creating scenic moments with details of bringing subordinates together: "I brought them both into the room at the same time, so there wasn't this, I'm saying one thing to one person and one thing to the other." If not for the moment of collective discussion, the organizational landscape cannot be seen (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

Relational Integrity

The proposition of relational integrity, respecting and being responsible to differences, and accountable to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) is embedded in Uhl-Bien's (2006) ideas of relational leadership. This is because for Uhl-Bien, relational leadership involves a "social influence process: emergent coordination and change (values, attitudes, behaviors, and ideologies) are constructed" (p. 665). Thus, relational leadership hinges on influence through being respectful, responsive, responsible, and accountable to others as part of experiencing leadership as a relational outcome. Relational integrity is a crucial feature of the processes and co-construction of leadership (Barge & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Study participants, as government officials, described their process for accountability in this study, as illustrated in the composite narrative.

Relational integrity involves "acting in ways that others can count on us, and being able to explain our decisions to others and ourselves" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Accordingly, Lorin, Rorie, Ariel, and Ellis described how others count on them through trust, respect, and care for the

members of their teams, critical components of relational integrity. For Lorin, relational integrity exceeded the boundaries of the organization with a peer network of policy and program advocates or an alliance: "[I] create my allies while I have them and . . . it's really fun to see when new guidance comes out." Rorie described the critical nature of communication and accountability for leadership processes: "Every role I've ever had in government has involved trust and strong interpersonal communications." Rorie's admission aligns with the need to explain decisions and actions as part of relational integrity (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

Sensing and Responding

An essential aspect of leading relationally, as outlined by Cunliffe and Eriksen (date?), involves "becoming more attuned" to sensing and responding during conversations. This involves "looking, listening, and anticipating" the other person's needs and preferences (p.?). Reception requires practice and focus, and this concept builds upon the earlier features of relational leadership, which emphasize the components of relational communication. Uhl-Bien and Fletcher (date?) further developed this idea with the concept of the "relational stance," which refers to a relational belief system or logic of interaction (p.?). Essentially, this means maintaining a heightened awareness of acting and reacting in the moment, keeping relational outcomes in mind. As Cunliffe and Eriksen (date?) argue, all conversations are interconnected, and actively participating in the "living conversation" is crucial for effective relational leadership (p. 1434).

Through their experiences and knowledge gained from federal agencies, study participants described leadership that demonstrated an awareness of sensing, responding, and anticipating conversations. Hildred adopted a pragmatic approach to policies related to office space changes in the context of the clean energy agenda. Instead of prescribing specific

requirements, they engaged in discussions at the senior levels of agencies, emphasizing the importance of open dialogue. This approach anticipates future conversations about binding executives to new policies regarding spatial requirements. Additionally, multiple participants favored in-person communication over virtual meetings to enhance "executive presence," as described by Santana. They preferred in-person communication to facilitate better observation and response among group members, emphasizing the significance of "team building" in a virtual setting.

Conclusions

This exploratory qualitative study sought to understand how career federal leaders experience ideological polarization in their roles and how they experience leadership in the same context. Based on the study's findings, there are two conclusions: 1. Ideological polarization is not just a political science concept based on the four dimensions in this study; 2. Career federal leaders require multidirectional (vertical and horizontal) relational leadership development in the context of ideological polarization. The following sections discuss each of the study's conclusions.

Conclusion 1: Ideological polarization is not just a political science concept based on the four dimensions in this study. Rather, ideological polarization in the context of work significantly shapes leadership opportunities, actions, and relationships.

This conclusion aligns with Ostrowski's (2022) conceptualization of ideology as a worldview or overarching philosophy, constructed from individual or collective claims, beliefs, or ways of thinking. Conversely, the findings diverge from Van Dijk (1998) and Freeden (2003), who strictly view ideology as a tool for political action and thus relegated to the study of political science. The research in this study suggests that while ideological polarization certainly

encompasses political action, it is a far more expansive phenomenon. Participants in this study consistently described their experience with ideological polarization as multilayered, involving divergent views on perceptions and on reality as it is or as it should be, which directly supports Ostrowski's core argument.

The study's findings reveal a nuanced and multilayered understanding of ideological polarization, with relevance across both public and private sectors. As the composite narrative illustrates, participants generally described a broad reception to emerging policies, particularly those fundamentally departing from the status quo. While political appointees and agency secretaries were responsible for driving the political agenda, senior policy advisors, embodied by Cameron, played a crucial role as translators when engaging subordinate department heads.

A similar dynamic emerged regarding programmatic adjustments in response to policy shifts. Throughout the study, participants described a general consensus on the feasibility of new policies. For instance, in the clean energy example, Hildred proactively engaged with departments and outside agencies to discuss changes before their implementation. Essentially, Hildred highlighted a divergent organizational ideology stemming from the mismatch between intended policy and operational reality. Each major policy shift consistently produced this bifurcated disposition between policy goals and the realities faced by career federal leaders.

This agency-level perspective on major policy shifts, particularly when policies did not align with reality, points to an organizational ideology. Building on Gupta and Briscoe's concept of organizational political ideology—which describes prevailing beliefs about the social world—this study adds another layer: agency-level beliefs or organizational ideology. This represents a distinct set of divergent views on reality, specifically concerning the organization's perceived capabilities and limitations based on its resources and constraints.

Previous research often combined institutional ideology (or agency beliefs) and power dynamics. In the private sector, CEOs significantly shape organizational ideology, with their own political leanings influencing resource allocation—liberal CEOs favoring evenhandedness and conservative CEOs creating more disparity (Gupta, 2018; Gupta & Briscoe, 2016). This suggests a top-down flow of ideology. In the public sector, while political appointees drive the presidential administration's agenda, career federal leaders often view these appointees as untrustworthy or prone to leaking sensitive information, which in turn hinders policy implementation (Resh, 2015). Resh's findings thus suggest a bottom-up influence of ideology in federal agencies, where career leaders' distrust can impede top-down directives.

The findings in this study reveal power as a distinct form of polarization, aligning Gupta's (2018) and Briscoe's (2016, 2018) research on CEO decision-making and resource distribution, as well as Resh (2015). Participants frequently distinguished between broad political ideologies and the exercise of power for personal or professional gain within organizations. For example, the narrative's discussion on government accountability highlights senior executives asking auditors to use "flowery language" to soften financial findings. Another instance involved Avery's experience with a former political official leveraging connections to access sensitive information for personal interests. Avery's resistance vividly illustrates the polarized aspect of these power dynamics, where the pursuit of individual agendas creates conflict within the organizational structure.

The findings of this study align with broader research on the sources of ideological conflict across various work sectors. Javidan et al. (2023) observed that, among public and private sector managers, conflict often stemmed from out-group bias linked to political party affiliation. While the Hatch Act aims to limit overt political affiliation within federal workplaces,

such incidents still occur, as described by participants in this study. For instance, Cameron and Pacey navigated the federal process to reprimand a subordinate whose political affiliation became gradually evident. This entire episode disrupted team trust, as other members viewed the disciplinary process as a "paid vacation" for the subordinate, necessitating additional work to cover the shortfall. Other participants recounted similar tensions arising from divergent views on social issues.

Javidan et al. (2023) also found that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated out-group bias, a phenomenon likewise noted in this study. The Hatch Act violation reported by Pacey's team members, for example, occurred during the pandemic, a period marked by increased remote and hybrid work. This coincided with an election year, intensifying the politicization and awareness of various issues. The fact that an individual, while representing a federal organization, engaged in partisan Facebook posts—a clear violation of federal regulations, particularly during an election year—suggests a blatant disregard for laws and public duties. The ever-increasing polarization and politicization of issues indicate that such problems are likely to persist.

Conclusion 2: Career federal leaders require multidirectional (vertical and horizontal) relational leadership development in the context of ideological polarization.

Uhl-Bien (2006) distinguished between entity and relational perspectives to support research on relational leadership. This separation of perspectives is crucial in comprehending how career federal leaders in this study perceived leadership in the context of polarization. According to Uhl-Bien, an entity perspective views relationships based on individual perceptions, attributes, and behaviors, portraying leadership as an influence relationship that ultimately achieves mutual goals. This traditional view (or entity perspective) forms the

foundation for understanding collective action, but has evolved over time with research findings suggesting that leadership can occur in various directions (Hogg, 2001). These assumptions contrast with those of a relational perspective.

A relational perspective presents a fundamentally different assumption of reality, as outlined by Uhl-Bien. This perspective emphasizes the significance of the experience of leadership in this study of career federal leaders. The participants in this study described a collaborative construction of reality in the context of polarization and their process of dialogue to engage in their roles. Notably, participants did not demonstrate skepticism towards mental models as Uhl-Bien had argued, but their descriptions were not anchored on "mental models" or "inner representations" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 661; Holmberg, 2000).

Career federal leaders in this study experienced leadership relationally, characterized by dialogue and moral integrity, even amidst ideological polarization. This finding aligns with the relational leadership conceptual framework guiding the study and broader research in the field. Uhl-Bien (2006) defined relational leadership as a social influence process, exploring how leadership is constructed through interactions. Operating from a constructionist ontology, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) empirically examined the nature of relationships among federal security leaders, identifying dialogism, polyphony, and integrity/responsibility as crucial to the leadership experience. Their work essentially established an epistemic foundation for relational leadership research. Additionally, Komives et al. (2013) argued that "leadership is a relational and ethical process for people attempting to accomplish positive change" (p. 33), a conclusion drawn from their research in higher education settings—a domain often marked by significant ideological divergence.

This conclusion contributes to ongoing discussions and debates about the theoretical properties of relational leadership. Dugan (2024) highlighted the conflict among researchers regarding this concept. On one side, Uhl-Bien (2006) posited relational leadership as a nontraditional theory—more of a framework for examining the relational dynamics inherent in leadership processes. Conversely, Hosking (2011) argued that relational leadership shouldn't be considered a theory at all, stopping short of labeling it a framework. For Hosking, it falls outside the traditional definition of a universal, explanatory theory.

Given these theoretical differences, this conclusion offers another examination of leadership using relational leadership as a guiding framework. These results further support the work of Uhl-Bien, Cunliffe, and Eriksen for two key reasons. First, within the context of ideological polarization, both the intrinsic nature of leadership and leadership as a social process clearly emerged from the data. Second, similar to Cunliffe and Eriksen's research on the TSA, this study specifically involved leaders at federal agencies, strengthening the applicability of relational leadership in this unique environment.

The themes in this study suggest relational leadership played a critical role for career federal leaders navigating ideological polarization. Participants described leadership as emerging from a co-construction of reality for collective action. This becomes more apparent when considering the themes alongside Cunliffe and Eriksen's (2011) recommendations, which emphasize practices like creating open dialogue, accepting responsibility for recognizing moments of difference, fostering "sensing moments," understanding the importance of relational integrity, and becoming attuned to sensing and responding in the present moment (p.?).

Participants in this study demonstrated an understanding of the relational perspective by creating space for dialogue to work out differences. This activity occurred across all four

dimensions of ideological polarization described in the study, according to each participant. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that open dialogue involves conversations where "pre-judgements are not made, but opportunities are created from knowing" (p. 1436). Career federal leaders described dialogue as their primary mode for working through differences, where they actively sought to understand others' perspectives and make sense of information. The dialogue modeled by Cameron and other characters in the narrative showed a willingness to understand, often letting go of preconceived notions of reality at the outset of conversations. In essence, their conversational approach welcomed disagreement.

Participants in this study described a responsibility for noticing and working through moments of difference across all four dimensions of ideological polarization. Sworn to protect and defend the Constitution, these participants inherently felt responsible for serving their organization's mission. However, the specific details of how organizational activities should unfold often remained subjective, influenced by individual perspectives and knowledge of institutional policy, regulations, and laws.

The participants also described an intense dedication and commitment to their profession through work both within and outside their organizations. This commitment often benefited their policy development or program direction on national issues, requiring them to compile information through communication with peers on new guidance and instructions. The composite narrative portrays a cadre of career federal leaders driven by a strong sense of mission, purpose, and responsibility.

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argued that a key aspect of leading relationally involves accepting responsibility for recognizing differences. They defined this as understanding the need to respond through dialogue, specifically "dispersing forces through dialogue that questions,

answers, and challenges disagreement" (p. 1435; Bakhtin, 1984, p. 285). Participants like Hildred, Ollie, and Avery demonstrated this understanding of relational leadership when navigating each issue discussed. Furthermore, this component of leading relationally was evident across all four dimensions of ideological polarization explored in this study.

Participants described their efforts to facilitate resolution of differences across all four dimensions of ideological polarization. Whether addressing agency-level beliefs, programming focus, power dynamics, or interpersonal interactions, participants offered examples of "shaping the scene," a concept discussed by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) in their research on relational leadership (p.?). Multiple career federal leaders specifically detailed holding in-person meetings to directly address divergent realities and viewpoints on contentious issues.

Participants revealed an understanding of relational integrity, consistently describing themselves as respectful, responsive, and accountable to others when differences arose. As senior civil servants, they took personal responsibility for their policy and program portfolios, operating with integrity and accountability within their agencies. This aligns with Cunliffe and Eriksen's (2011) argument that relational leadership requires understanding the importance of "relational integrity"—being "responsive to differences, being accountable to others, [and] acting in ways that others can count on us" (p. 1441).

Participants in this study described their process of sensing and responding through actively engaging others inside and outside their organizations, careful listening, and anticipating conversations. This aligns with Cunliffe and Eriksen's (2011) argument that leading relationally involves becoming more "attuned to sensing and responding" in the "unfolding conversation" (p. 1441). This suggests a reflexive mode of thinking and speaking when interacting with peers, subordinates, and superiors across and within organizations.

Hildred and others demonstrated an acute awareness of team members and colleagues in the moment, attuned to the emerging dynamics of conversations. Sensing and responding emerged in Hildred's stories of anticipating responses from policy directives and in Avery's accounts of preventing the misuse of access to government information. Finally, multiple participants offered examples of responding immediately to differences that countered productive dialogue, as seen with Santana, or displaying professional integrity when confronted with potentially fraudulent activity, as described by Ollie regarding government accountability.

Implications

The findings and conclusions of this study offer significant implications for theory, research, and practice. Theoretically, these findings suggest a traditional theoretical position for relational leadership, particularly within the public sector, challenging its prior classification as a nontraditional theory. This approach would open avenues for future research to apply the framework used in this study across public and private work sectors. Finally, this study provides practitioners, current and emerging career federal leaders, with a new way to conceptualize leadership through a relational perspective, especially when navigating the complexities of ideological polarization.

The study's theoretical conceptual framework provided a unique lens for understanding how career federal leaders navigate ideological polarization and experience leadership. The framework integrated Uhl-Bien's nontraditional relational leadership theory with Cunliffe and Eriksen's complementary insights into the nature of relationships. This combinational lens was critical for exploring the ontology and epistemology of leadership, extending the evidence on what relational leadership is and how to recognize it. Moreover, a consistent finding was participants' description of a relational disposition amidst the formidable challenges of

ideological polarization, suggesting future potential for applying this framework to study leaders in similar polarized contexts as part of leader development.

This study also offers a significant methodological contribution to the field of Human and Organizational Learning through the use of a composite narrative. Most dissertations in this field present findings in a traditional form of prose with standard methods for preserving anonymity of participants while conveying findings. However, this dissertation is among the few to synthesize the shared experiences of multiple participants into a single cohesive narrative as a powerful alternative. This approach also illuminates the structural and system pressures experienced across a cohort of leaders. Most importantly, this approach was vital in an era of political context, such as the federal workplace where interviewees may be vulnerable or hesitant to share unfiltered stories. This approach may be increasingly essential for future workplace research aiming to understand complex, contested organizational environments where an additional layer of anonymity is needed.

This study reveals several research implications. First, researchers should consider aligning relational leadership theories with the realities of ideological polarization, especially within the federal government. While Uhl-Bien's work explored divergent beliefs, it didn't specifically address polarization in this context. Similarly, Cunliffe and Eriksen's research on federal leaders didn't examine ideological polarization. This study bridges these critical gaps, suggesting a clear need for quantitative methods to measure how ideological polarization impacts relational leadership effectiveness. Additionally, these findings emphasize that polarization is a multifaceted issue for career federal leaders, requiring a fresh look at how divergent ideas arise and how co-constructed solutions can be fostered. This opens doors for subsequent post-positive research into career federal leaders' experiences with ideological polarization.

This study's findings offer several crucial implications for practice. First, the unique insights from participants' experiences with leadership and the multilayered nature of polarization directly apply to how practitioners can update their cognitive models to better navigate today's polarized landscape. Federal employees, especially those in leadership roles, should fundamentally rethink their approach to polarization within the federal government. This research consistently pointed to the idea that reality is co-constructed, suggesting a new way of leading in polarized environments. Leaders should enter each conversation and situation with this in mind. More pointedly, every interaction is a negotiation. This understanding has significant and direct applications for career federal leaders striving to effectively navigate and lead in deeply divided contexts (see table 10).

Table 10: Leader Development Tool - Multidirectional Relational Leadership

	Agency Level Beliefs	**Program Focus**	**Power Dynamics**	**Interpersonal Dynamics**
Open Dialogue	Encourage the exchange of belief systems across programs	Facilitate group Collaboration	Connect with the use of position or authority	Perspective Sharing
Scenic Moments	Enable space for seeing differences across the organization	Leverage opportunities to discuss differences	Enable space for seeing differences across the organization	Focused discussions with peers
Noticing Differences	Identify and confront agency resistance to policy and program change	Challenge assumptions and unify departments and teams	Responding to program challenges/conflict	Observe different viewpoints of peers
Sensing and Responding	Anticipating Differences	Anticipating Differences	Anticipating Differences	Anticipating Differences
Relational Integrity	Accountability & Transparency	Accountability & Transparency	Accountability & Transparency	Accountability & Transparency

Note. Author original.

The Leader Development Tool is a developmental framework derived from the literature on relational leadership and participant experiences of the career federal leaders navigating ideological polarization in this study. The table maps the necessary relational competencies across the agency's operational scope, categorized into four core dimensions: Program Focus, Power Dynamics, Interpersonal Dynamics, and Open Dialogue. The five rows illustrate the leaders' options for responding to difference and conflict: moving from basic Open Dialogue and Perspective Sharing toward proactive Sensing and Responding, all underpinned by Relational Integrity (Accountability & Transparency) consistent with Cunliffe and Erikson (2011). As a Leader Development Tool, the matrix suggests that effective relational leadership in a polarized environment requires leaders to systematically cultivate these abilities, from encouraging basic collaboration to anticipating differences and, ultimately, embedding principles of mutual accountability across every facet of organizational belief and interaction.

Finally, the study's findings offer crucial practical recommendations for the broader workforce navigating ideologically polarized environments. Organizational members should shift their focus to seeking context, not agreement, to understand differing perspectives. Simultaneously, leaders must adeptly manage the profound tensions between policy mandates and divergent realities within the agency. As a result of this dynamic, members of the organization must understand that leaders prioritize maintaining organizational coherence based on contextual information (like policy and political pressures) rather than striving for ideological alignment.

Future Research

There are several avenues for future research. First, future research should modify the theoretical lens using sensemaking theory (Weick et.al., 2005). The findings in this study

highlight the persistent struggle leaders face amid divergent realities. As a result, future researchers should investigate how leaders and followers construct and negotiate organizational reality. This could be achieved by examining the role of relationality in shared sensemaking, a departure from the focus of this study, which centered the leader's perspective of reality.

Second, and related to the sensemaking process, future research should address the limitations of the leader-centric view with a 360-degree relational study. This new direction would expand the scope of the leader's experience with interviews of direct reports, peers, and supervisors. With the goal of a complete, reciprocal view, researchers could examine relational dynamics.

Finally, to test the generalizability of these relational strategies, future research should include a cross-sector comparative analysis. Researchers should consider different contexts, such as state governments, private corporations, or nonprofit organizations, as part of this comparison study. In this way, the comparison would determine if the practices identified in this study are unique to the federal government sector or if they are generalizable best practices for effectively managing ideological polarization across diverse organizational types.

Final Thoughts

Before conducing this study, I held a perspective, common in the military, of the civilian federal workforce as monolithic and somewhat passive characterized by 9-to-5 clock punching instead of fierce professional dedication. The findings of this study changed my perspective, as the participants of this study displayed a deep, unwavering commitment and passion for their work. Almost all of the career federal leaders of this study described their experience as part of self-funded association memberships, and all pursued advanced training to position themselves to advocate for their agencies in the most efficient manner possible, this, in the face of a

polarized environment of the NCR. The level of professionalism and self-investment likely rivals that of their private sector peers. The passion and commitment I observed in this study demonstrates the resiliency of the federal workforce and it is my hope that this study helps to reframe the narrative for those in the military and others across the political spectrum who hold outdated assumptions about these civil servants.

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Appendix A: Subjectivity Statement

Merriam and Grenier (2019) suggested that researchers explain their perspective and relationship to the problem of study. They recommended this information appear in the opening chapters of the dissertation or separate subjectivity statement such as the one that follows.

The researcher is a natural-born citizen of the United States and identifies as a male of African descent. He was raised in the northeastern part of the U.S. but has enjoyed travel throughout the country and around the world. The researcher has not been to every state in the U.S., much less every country and continent in the world. However, the researcher reads widely and studies other cultures, especially those encountered during international travel to Europe, Africa, and Asia. The researcher is an active-duty military officer with over 25 years of service, three different multiple occupational specialty certifications, and decades of leadership experiences. The researcher has multiple degrees from higher education learning experiences, which shapes the ways in which he thinks about the topic of this study and general discussion during interactions with others.

The researcher made several assumptions aligned with a naturalist or relativist (constructivist) worldview. That is, the nature of reality. The researcher assumes reality is relative and must be constructed through holistic study and not a "single tangible reality out there" in the form of variables (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The nascent nature of the research problem suggests that much work is needed to better understand the recent proliferation of ideological polarization in organizations. The second assumption pertains to how knowledge becomes known, which the researcher believes must be interpreted and constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This raises the third assumption. The researcher is assuming a qualitative methodology, using the researcher as the instrument, will enable the construction of meaningful knowledge following the interviews of multiple participants.

The researcher has professional relationships with some of the military leaders who were at the Defense Department during the January 6th riot at the U.S. Capitol Building and vilified by the media as failing. That culminating and polarizing event during the last U.S. presidential administration led to the researcher's interest in studying other career federal leader experiences throughout the National Capital Region. Military leaders train most of their adult lives to make decisions under pressure in high-stress and dangerous environments around the world. However, from the summer of 2020 to fall of 2021, the combination of the novel and existential public health challenges as well as the social and political turbulence created a unique set of conditions that pushed indoctrinated apolitical military leaders to their limits. Conversely, many federal leaders have successfully and effectively navigated the recent turbulent times and continue to perform in a post-COVID, but increasingly polarized, environment of the NCR. The researcher is assuming that career federal leaders doing the work of policy, programs, and projects have continued their efforts without fail. Thus, those leader experiences and successful efforts should be examined, explained, and made explicit for practical knowledge and future research on the topic.

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear (participant name),

My name is Abdullah Clark and I am completing a research study directed by Dr. Julia Storberg-Walker, associate professor of the Human and Organizational Learning program at the George Washington University. I am seeking your participation in a dissertation research study on career federal leader experiences in the National Capital Region.

Based on a recommendation, your agency, and/or your scope of work in policy, programs, and projects, I have identified you as a potential participant for this research study. Eligibility for participants include: must be a career federal government employee civil servant and not a political appointee and must be General Schedule (GS) 13 - 15 (or agency equivalent). Please go to the following link to schedule a discussion: [redacted]

Participation in this study involves a one-on-one (virtual) discussion on your experience as a career federal leader in the NCR. Participation is completely voluntary and anonymous. As a result, there is minimal to no risk involved. You will have access to the participant informed consent form, which describes the agreement for being part of the study as well as the measures taken to protect your privacy, prior to our discussion.

Should you decide to participate, please visit the link mentioned above or contact me at [redacted] if there are any questions. However, if you are not willing to participate, please share with someone you believe matches the criteria described above.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Abdullah H. Clark
Doctoral Candidate
Human and Organizational Learning
The George Washington University

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

How do career federal leaders describe ideological polarization?

What are the leadership experiences of career federal leaders in the context of ideological polarization?

Informed consent script prior to beginning interview:

Thank you for your participation in this study. As outlined in the informed consent form, your privacy and well-being are of paramount importance. This interview will be audio recorded and securely stored using password protection to ensure your confidentiality. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript of our conversation and provide feedback on the study findings. You retain complete control over your participation. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. You may also inform me of your decision to withdraw at a later time using the contact information provided. Do you have any questions about the informed consent form, your rights as a participant, or the study procedures before we begin?

1. Please describe your leadership experiences in the last few years.

2. Please describe your leadership experiences with workgroups and teams both within and across organizations.

Relational Leadership

3. There is evidence that suggests the importance of leaders influencing trust, empathy, reciprocity, responsiveness, and relatability. Think about a time when you had to resolve conflict:

- How do you think trust, empathy, and mutual communication impacted that situation?

- How do you think responsiveness and relatability impacted the situation?

Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

4. There is evidence that workplaces are experiencing more conflicts in part due to ideological polarization. **Do you think you have encountered this in your past leadership roles?**

[If yes, go to question #10; If no, go to question #6; If unsure, go to next question]

5. **Do you think you have encountered conflict or differences in teams about policy, program, or project?**

[If yes, go to question #9; if no, go to question #8; if unsure, go to question #7]

6. **How do you know that the conflicts or differences were not the result of polarization?**

7. **Have you heard any political "us versus them" kind of lunch or water cooler conversations?**

[If yes, go to question #12; if no or unsure, go to next question]

8. Are you concerned about political polarization in the workplace?

9. There is evidence of increased conflict and division in the workplace since returning to in-person work. ***Think of a time when you were confronting differences and division on policy, program, or project issues among members of your team. Who else was involved? What was your role? How did it turn out? What made the incident significant for you?***

10. I am interested in career federal leader experience in the NCR because of increasing polarization in the NCR. ***Think of a time when you were part of ideologically polarizing discussion. Who else was involved? What was your role? How did it turn out? What made the incident significant for you?***

[Ask the questions below following mention of political coercion or avoiding polarization.]

11. The federal employee viewpoint survey for 2022 had a question on political coercion which suggests there are reports of this problem**.** ***Think of a time when you observed political coercion. Who else was involved? What was your role? How did it turn out? What made the incident significant for you?***

12. Sometimes it may be easier to avoid conflict, especially in the process of working in a collaborate setting with inter and intra agency workgroups on major policy, programs, and/or project development. ***Think of a time when you or a subordinate noticed polarizing discussions or actions and not did not say anything. Who else was involved? What was your role? How did it turn out? What made the incident significant for you?***

Interview Closing

13. ***What final points would you like to share about your experiences in the federal government that could inform this study?***

Thank you for your time. I appreciate you sharing your leader experiences with me and learning more about your work. I will contact you via email within the next month for your review of the summary of our discussion. Feel free to reach out to me if you would like to add to our discussion. Also, please let me know if there is anyone you recommend participating for this research topic.

Appendix D: Composite Narrative Sample

Raw Data

"I called [it] the Trump reorg (reorganization). And as you know, the Republicans have wanted to shut down the U.S. Department of Education." "And so, and so I feel like that, that reorg was probably more about that and sometimes quote unquote to make us more efficient. I mean, I've always been leanly staffed so." **[Lorin]**

"So, so sometimes I do have some personal pull because I work with the political appointees, right? On the U.S. interagency council on homelessness means four times a year and some years we've chaired or sorry, vice chair, the council, NO chair and vice chair, and, so, you know, I could talk to them" **[Lorin]**

"We find each other, you know, there's sometimes, you know, special topical sessions. Well, of course, if we have within Eds, you know, bring together people to focus." **[Lorin]**

"[I] create my allies while I have them and then it's really fun to see, you know, new guidance come out" **[Lorin]**

Completed Composite Narrative Section

Reorganization

Lorin's work involves extensive collaboration, both within DGS and with external stakeholders. Internally, Lorin navigated the challenges of multiple reorganizations and aligning different beliefs and perspectives within the organization, particularly when it comes to policy decisions and guidance. The move of the homeless and neglected delinquent programs to the Office of Safe and Healthy Students and subsequent shifts highlighted the tension between discretionary and formula grant approaches. The 2019 reorganization, aiming for a functional workgroup structure where "people wouldn't be assigned to programs, you'd be assigned to a workgroup and a principal office component based on a function or skill," a transition marked by "culture shock."

Networks and Councils

Much of Lorin's efforts to combat the shapeshifting teams and workspaces had to do with the use of both formal and informal networks. "We have a mighty advocacy network," said Lorin, "so my connections help with the discontinuities of teams." Many advocates of homelessness worked across agencies and formed an informal network. Lorin worked with colleagues from other agencies focused on housing and labor to develop solutions. They meet to discuss policy and program changes and challenges outside work driven by a passion for their work. "That's great, thank you for what you do," said Cameron, also asking, "How do your advocacy connections overlap and impact your work with councils?" Cameron was referring to the Interagency Council on Homelessness. "Tremendously," said Lorin. "Cameron, you should attend the next one; our discussions help shape how we engage the council. It's the only time we have to engage political appointees without expertise."

These cycles of collaboration, informal and formal discussions on policies and programs, are critical, especially in circumstances when guidance is too broad. In those circumstances, different ideas and interpretations of policy disrupt program execution. Lorin's informal network helps with the problem of vague guidance, but there are limits because of internal and external political pressure. Lorin reminds Cameron that "we do what we can as professionals, but many at DGS are overly cautious, and for different reasons, some in Congress want us to shut down our programs."

Appendix E: Codebook Sample

Participant	Segment/ Incident	Transcript Page #	In vivo	First Cycle Code	Second Cycle Code	Final Code	Theme
Dimension 2: Program Conflict (Program Focus)							
Lorin	**AC**: So there seems to be a lot of like movement, right? I mean I know you're describing like like decades here, but like, why, why all the organization reorganization and shifting of like why why why all this change? **Lorin:** It's a good question. I think the, the recent one quote unquote, in 2018, I called the Trump reorg. And as you know, the Republicans have wanted to shut down the US Department of Education. Black grants are all of our formula grant programs to states make those block grants and let states to. Side, which historically has not	Pages 10-11	"I called [it] the Trump reorg (reorganization). And as you know, the Republicans have wanted to shut down the US Department of Education." "And so, and so I feel like that, that reorg was probably more about that and sometimes quote unquote to make us more efficient. I mean, I've always been leanly staffed so."	Political Pressure / Staff Efficiency	Pressure of polarization; Program Changes	Programmatic differences	Program Conflict (Programmatic Focus)
Ollie	**AC:** Have you had or experienced team members or members of your organization who had differences on, I guess differences, different beliefs and realities of the actual, you know, programs or projects you were working on? **Ollie: Okay. If whatever you're working on, you know, budget wise or if it's something, you know, that is geared towards solving a an issue**	Pages 8-10	"maybe they may have disagreed with the actual existence of the program or what the program is trying to achieve. So they may have had a different version of understanding of, of, of the actual problem"	Program conflict/Different understanding of policy issue/problem	Program Conflict	Programmatic differences	Program Conflict (Programmatic Focus)
Jocelyn	**AC:** Certain program is, is not essential. And, and that and that in certain in turn it creates a, a level of friction when you're trying to get resources and or facilitate some sort of change. What about any sort of conflict in terms of interagency work with respect to either, I mean in this. The case could be indones or I guess in in terms of some of your your DEI work. **Jocelyn: Yeah, so I would say in that case, it's always about ensuring that**	Pages 7-8	Yeah, so I would say in that case, it's always about ensuring that my team does a very good job of articulating return on investment and mention integration.	Explaining value of programs critical	Program Articulation Critical	Programmatic differences	Program Conflict (Programmatic Focus)
Jocelyn	**AC:** In many cases it sounds like worked on things that are, have been politicized. So have you had any, I guess people of your team kind of I guess teammates on your team ever talk about their experience of. How people view the work that you've done as as part of leading any teams. And I'm I'm thinking of a scenario where you have a teammate that's coming to you or some sort of supporting that's coming to you and, and having difficulty, I guess with whatever it is that they've got to do in terms of tasks based on the of what it is	Pages 6-7	I would honestly say that that's actually just something we don't, in the field of work I'm in, I think for a non title 50 (agency authority) entity that might be more normalized in a way say if I was at CBP or ICE, much easier to politicize my work	Intelligence work resistant to polarization ; Boarder Patrol or ICE easier to politicice than intelligence field	Homeland Security Agencies Politicized	Politicized Agencies (Programs)	Program Conflict (Programmatic Focus)
Pacey	Of background background understanding the in the tech night of that operation. So he was able to he he really saved the day honestly. He stepped into the role of the lab manager. He's a GS 14 and he shouldn't have had to be doing spending his day doing all this minutiae of.Reeffectively training the technicians, but with his help invent the lab, at least for several months since we could do a hiring to bring someone on board that now, was a huge accomplishment that I felt I had to complete		replacing that manager with someone when I felt everybody else could just sit down. He knew what he was doing and we had trust in him and he understood and could undo all the mistakes of the past. So in the end it had a very positive success story, but the conflict was trying to manage it at the time. When it was happening and come to a management style, the director had to work and see where each other was coming from	Different views on program changes	Program dispute	Programmatic differences	Program Conflict (Programmatic Focus)