

Positive C-Suite Behavior and Its Flourishing Organizational Culture Impact

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Abstract

Leaders create culture. Culture creates the next generation of leaders (Schein, 2004).

Within publicly held for-profit companies, executive-level managers (commonly referred to as the C-suite) have responsibility for the company's stewardship. As C-suite leaders strategize about how best to achieve company and shareholder objectives, one thing has become increasingly clear: how they treat people matters. Therefore, understanding the enablers and impediments to achieving flourishing work cultures within organizations is essential. However, the current literature regarding the specific behavioral attributes a company's top leaders need to demonstrate in these critical and highly influential roles is scant. This dissertation considers C-suite leaders who are currently leading or have recently led culturally flourishing organizations as a lens for examining how positive C-suite behaviors can drive flourishing organizational cultures. This study's findings seek to provide additional insights into the existing literature on leadership, culture, and organizational culture.

Dedication

I dedicate this study to my beloved parents, who instilled a love for learning at a very young age. So, Mom, thank you, and I wish my late father were here to witness this milestone.

Acknowledgments

I thank God Almighty, from whom all blessings flow.

To my cherished husband and son, you each have always been my greatest champions, my heartbeats. Thank you for your unwavering support and unconditional love. You bring me so much joy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Leadership Gap Hiding in Plain Sight

Several large-scale companies have publicly and infamously collapsed in recent history and are no longer in business. On the surface, bankruptcy is the explanation provided for these abrupt business failures. However, upon closer scrutiny and as more information emerged regarding the root cause, it became evident that there was a colossal failure in leadership punctuated by less-than-stellar behaviors, accompanied by less-than-healthy cultural work environments.

When assessing accountability in the aftermath of a crisis, the question inevitably arises regarding who bears responsibility for ensuring an organization has the right leadership behaviors and healthy work culture. Typically, the most senior leaders, the C-suite, have the highest organizational responsibility and accountability for ensuring the delivery of company performance. There also is growing awareness and agreement, particularly after the scandals of former giants like Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco, that the C-suite must actively oversee and mitigate such ethical compliance risks. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) uses the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 as the control for monitoring publicly traded companies' financial reporting (Kenton, 2020). The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 is a law the U.S. Congress passed on July 30, 2002, as a method of protecting investors against fraudulent financial reporting by corporations (Kenton, 2020).

Because the C-suite sits at the company's highest levels, the behaviors they demonstrate are often the model by which the rest of the organization patterns its conduct. Whether positive or not so positive, these behaviors determine an organization's culture. Therefore, leaders (in this case, the C-suite) create the culture that makes the next generation of leaders. Specifically, the following was noted by Fierce (2001):

Not to mention, leaders need to be modeling the behavior they want to see. Studies have revealed a correlation between C-suite behavior and the model behavior they wanted to be exhibited. If you want the people around you to say "hello" and engage, you need to model this behavior as a leader in the company. Interactions need to be genuine. People can spot inauthenticity from miles away.

In their quest to manage effectively, leaders should ask themselves, "Is my organization flourishing?" and if the answer is no, the next question C-suite leaders need to ask is, "Is the problem my leadership team and me?" Companies deemed successful and great places to work opine that their flourishing work environments are key enablers and the foundation for success. Conversely, defunct companies who experienced catastrophic failures have undergone post-mortems that often reveal toxic or unhealthy work cultures. These opposite extremes reflect highly flourishing and highly toxic environments.

Understanding whether top leaders can lead in a manner that fosters well-being for the company and its stakeholders is relevant for the preservation of public corporations.

According to Martin (2021), publicly traded corporations have been the dominant business structure for over one hundred years. However, this structure has been called into question due to the current model that incentivizes executives to manage their businesses in tiny, short-term windows designed to net them max compensation. Martin (2021) went on to say that public companies no longer serve the interests of their most important stakeholders, namely their workforce or knowledge workers.

The gap in the literature, and thus an opportunity, resides in the exploration of specific positive leadership behaviors and attributes that C-suite members should possess to help drive flourishing workplace cultures. Businesses occupying the space between the best companies to work for and those that have collapsed from catastrophic leadership failures might benefit most from this study because determining and implementing the right mix of positive behaviors and attributes could represent the difference in the journey from a good organization to one that flourishes.

Each organization has a unique culture. Publications such as *Comparably* began awarding “Best Culture” in 2019 and highlighted 50 companies. *Business Insider* (2020) also lists its 25 top companies for best culture. Interestingly, a plethora of business organizations were not added to these lists. The New York Stock Exchange

reported over 6,000 publicly traded companies; it would appear there exists an opportunity for companies to improve their work cultures (Israel, 2020).

While these companies may escape any catastrophic organizational failures, they may not realize optimal improvements within their work culture. Therefore, this study might prove helpful for organizations that want to make quantum leap changes within their culture.

Organizational toxicity is real and can become difficult to overcome. There are clear indicators that signal a culture may have toxic leanings. Telltale signs include adopting an “us” and “them” mentality, an inability to tell the truth, differences in what is said publicly and what is occurring privately, the need to play politics to get anything done, talking about people rather than to them, and situations where only the boss’s opinion matters (Nieuwhof, 2020). Further, poor communication, bad attitudes, a feeling in the gut that something is off, tyrannical bosses, and an environment where dysfunction reigns are indicators of non-flourishing culture (Wilding, 2021). Given the current fierce competitive landscape where the quest for sustained business viability, growth, and top talent is of the utmost importance, flourishing cultures can provide companies with a sustained competitive edge.

Who owns the task of modeling, through effective leadership, the behaviors necessary to create and sustain a flourishing organizational culture? It is the most senior

executives who lead corporate companies. Sound business ethics demands leadership that promotes and ensures employees' adherence to established policies and procedures. Compliance and positive leadership behaviors are not the same things. Is it possible to uphold ethical compliance requirements and not demonstrate positive leadership attributes? Absolutely. According to transformational leaders like Jack Ma, former CEO of Alibaba, flourishing cultures are those where profits are an outcome rather than the goal (Kotter, 2011).

Further, Ma has believed that it is the responsibility of top leadership (including the CEO) to create a thriving culture. He has acknowledged being told outright by businesspeople that 99% of them do not care about culture; they care about making money. Ma has rebuked membership within this group and declared his preference for joining the 1% who believe making money is an outcome rather than the primary goal (Kotter, 2011).

Research Question

As an experienced practitioner who has worked mainly in the middle area of the cultural spectrum, it is clear that one thing is certain: leadership behavior at the top trickles down throughout the rest of the organization. In less-than-flourishing organizations, many C-suite leaders may be unaware of the impact of their behaviors. Further, some leaders may be aware of their leadership shortfalls, but either do not know how to correct their potentially non-productive leadership behaviors or are unwilling to do so. Somewhere between the intersection of demonstrated leadership

rooted in compliance (i.e., business ethics) and demonstrated leadership that enables a flourishing organizational culture, differentiation between toxic, healthy, or flourishing organizational cultures are created. To win in today's challenging business environment, C-suite leaders must turn their attention to creating cultural foundations rooted in positive leadership behaviors.

Positive leadership, not just leadership, is critical for creating flourishing organizational cultures. Merriam-Webster has defined *flourishing* as “to grow luxuriantly; to achieve success; to be in a state of activity or production; to reach a height of development or influence” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b.). A flourishing organization is one where the workplace culture thrives with mutual trust, transparency, and unity. Within a flourishing organizational culture, everyone works together and is unified around belief in the company’s mission and each other. They are bound by a mutual trust which is significant in that it signals an understanding by all that trust is a two-way affair, no matter the organizational level. This top-to-bottom bonding, or shared commitment, enables an atmosphere where people want to come to work. Identifying precisely how to create and sustain this kind of unicorn within a business world that has not traditionally viewed culture as a prime enabler for sustained success is not easy (Lopus, 2019). Thinking a bit more about Schein’s (2004) assertion that leaders create culture prompted deeper exploration into whether a specific set of behaviors foster flourishing cultures. As stated previously, top

executive leadership, known collectively as the C-suite, bears responsibility for leading these companies.

Therefore, the following research question is posed for exploration: How do specific C-suite leadership behavior attributes drive flourishing organizational culture?

In posing this question, this study explores the behavioral attributes that, when demonstrated by members of a company's C-suite, aid in shifting organizations from their current state to flourishing organizational cultures. The expected outcome of this research is to emerge closer to identifying specific C-suite leader attributes that will enable company leaders to identify and unlock barriers to promoting flourishing organizational culture success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how positive behaviors, when demonstrated by C-suite leaders within publicly held companies, drive flourishing organizational cultures.

Technical competencies have long been much sought-after traits when filling C-suite leader roles because traditionally, these skills were deemed necessary for delivering business profitability. However, leaders today are finding that in a vastly competitive business environment, what was traditionally thought of as soft skills (a.k.a. “the people stuff”) are really not that easy to master. In fact, it is not an overreach to say that effectively managing the soft skills keeps leaders up at night. The ability to secure and keep talent aside, sustained flourishing work environments today requires employees willing to actively engage. Lopus (2019) referred to this active engagement as fantastic teams. Such teams are effective, engage in passionate dialog around issues, resolve conflict, and strive for excellence in what they do. For sure, these employees need to engage in a way that delivers customer satisfaction.

However, employees cannot accomplish this task alone. Executive leadership plays a pivotal role in determining whether an organization flourishes or not. Today, a new level of customer satisfaction, brought on by increased competition, mandates the

ability to surprise and delight clients to the degree that such treatment engenders customer loyalty.

Ensuring a flourishing organizational culture within the workplace has grown increasingly significant as a differentiator when clients decide with whom they want to do business and potential employees determine which companies they want to work for (Laker, 2021). Today's successful leaders with thriving organizational cultures seemingly have found a way to create, connect, and articulate a compelling company purpose and identify employees' roles in helping to get there.

Culture (a.k.a., What's Your Gumbo?)

In some way, shape, or form, all aspects of daily life influence culture. Culture begins with understanding who we are. The great musical composer Quincy Jones asked a profound question after an initial introduction and during a conversation. He asked simply, "What's your gumbo?" (Q. Jones, personal communication, October 3, 2017). For him, his question was very straightforward. After explaining what he meant by using the term *gumbo*, it became clear that Jones was asking this question to elicit a deeper understanding of his new acquaintance. In this instance, *gumbo* means the birthplace where people, their parents, and their grandparents were reared. Later, it was discovered that Jones is also a humanitarian among his varied musical talents, and he is intensely interested in achieving world peace. To achieve this peace, he believes it is necessary to understand the cultural aspects of those he meets. While a

seemingly lighthearted question, it signals Jones's desire to fully understand the foundation or ground floor of who we are as people.

Gumbo is a soup of southern Louisiana origin (Vogt, 2009) known for its thick texture or roux, made using oil and flour as its base. Added to the roux is a hodge-podge of different types of seafood, andouille sausage, and various kinds of vegetables, including onions and celery. Getting the roux that gives the soup texture is essential, as is adding okra. Okra is the one vegetable that is a required addition to this recipe. Otherwise, according to some southern elders, it is not considered gumbo. However, the variety of ingredients used truly makes it gumbo, regardless of recipe variations. The beauty of this culinary dish is that no matter which vegetables, seasonings, roux, and seafood accompany the okra, the different textures and flavors all work in harmony as they simmer in a huge pot such that the finished product yields a true culinary delight.

The analogy to gumbo Jones made as he posed his question was rooted in acknowledging that everyone is different, with different experiences and perspectives. The fact that he asks this gumbo question almost immediately when introduced to someone is instructional for how leaders might engage in organizations where many employees with many types of gumbo gather in the workplace. Imagine how much more effective leaders and employees would be if they simply took the time to understand what is in others' gumbo. Jones's question signaled his understanding that

people are not one-size-fits-all. Starting from a position of curiosity rather than judgment and bias represents a positive first step to engagement.

Within the corporate business world, a number of variables can exist that contribute to a company's success. However, for those companies experiencing sustained success, even as they weather storms caused by volatility that has seemingly become par for the course, one key variable consistently emerges. This variable is the organizational impact of demonstrated positive or transformational leadership from the company's most senior executives. Transformational leaders are positive, optimistic, and trustful. They are emotionally intelligent, encourage teamwork, set high expectations, and promote innovations (Burns, 1978). Further, these leaders change their organization's culture by inspiring a sense of mission and purpose about the importance of the group's work and stimulating new ways of thinking and problem-solving. In turn, individuals in the organization are inspired to achieve high performance (Hurdezeu, 2015).

Moreover, these companies have indicated that their flourishing organizational culture is the factor that serves as a critical enabler for their success. Strength or fissures within the work culture often emerge when things do not go as intended or the business experiences some type of disruption. As stated by O'Keefe and Jee (2020), "A company's organizational culture is like the ground everyone and

everything in the company stand on—it is that from which sustainable business grows.”

One of the most eye-opening moments during a qualitative analysis assignment, as part of the Executive Doctoral Program in Values-Driven Leadership curriculum at Benedictine University, was interviewing C-suite leaders. When C-suite leaders were interviewed for a pre-dissertation assignment to define what culture meant to them, no one provided the same response. One respondent stated simply that culture, to him, was a way of “getting stuff done” (Pre-dissertation Leader #1). Another respondent believed culture is how employees are empowered versus micromanaged (Pre-dissertation Leader #2). A company’s strategy is its culture, said another respondent. Without culture, he posited, there can be no strategy; there is an unavoidable intertwining (A. Mulally, personal communication, October 9, 2020). One leader also sought to drive home the point that culture is not something to be found in textbook academics. Culture, he said, is a feeling. Culture is how he feels (Pre-Dissertation Leader #2).

Despite the different definitions provided, all agree that culture, in their view, reflects values and how people are treated. These stated definitions culled from C-suite leaders operating in a practitioner’s world bolster the belief that sustained flourishing cultures go well beyond strategies that focus solely on ethics-compliant cultures.

Definition and origins of culture

Culture is a phenomenon dating back to early civilization, and it has not proven easy to define because it means different things to different people. Over the years, anthropologists and sociologists have produced many models and definitions to explain culture (Schein, 2017). Williams (1976) stated that “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (p. 87). Indeed, the very idea of culture embraces a range of topics, processes, differences, and even paradoxes. The concept is at the minimum complex and at most so divergent in its various applications as to defy the possibility, or the necessity, of any singular designation. It is, nevertheless, authentic in its meaning, both in everyday language and in its increasingly broad currency within the modern academy’s fashionable discourses. It is rightly supposed that every generation creates new objects, ideas, and meanings (Jenks, 2004). Jenks (2004) made a great point regarding the likelihood of generational reviews of the essence of culture.

In the wake of the recent resurgence of social justice and demands for equity, younger generation Black people have signaled an unwillingness to accept racial inequity. The manner of protests calls to mind the marches of the 1960s era. However, these current protests elevate an urgency and self-expression that shows itself differently from the demonstrations of yesteryear. Then, both reactions to the movement were powerful. However, they were culturally different. This difference, most likely, is attributed to the passage of time and, hence, a different generation. Today’s protests have been

widely more far-reaching, primarily due to advances in technology. Further, a record number of companies have publicly denounced racism via the issuance of official statements and have vowed to support positive change. As a result of the glaring spotlight the recent upheaval has revealed, a new thoughtfulness has prompted many companies to re-examine their culture.

The history of culture, its various usages, and meanings derive from diverse study areas, including philosophy, critical aesthetics, literary criticism, anthropology, and sociology (Jenks, 2004). Culture is multi-faceted and can appear contradictory, depending on context and lived experiences. Further, Jenks (2004) posited that culture emerged in the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century as part of, and mainly as a reaction to, the massive changes occurring in the structure and quality of social life. Jenks (2004) referred to this as the advance of modernity.

T.S. Eliot (1949) offered an alternate take on culture, breaking it into three distinct groups. He spoke of the individual, a group or class, and all of society. Eliot (1949) alluded to an interconnectedness when speaking of culture when he said that the individual's culture depends on that person's group or class and that the group or class's culture depends on the whole society's culture to which that group or class belongs. Therefore, this interconnectedness is the organization's fundamental culture, and it is the meaning of the term *culture* (Eliot, 1949).

These definitions are helpful, yet there is a need to simplify further. For the context of this study, Merriam-Webster has provided the most appropriate explanation.

Merriam-Webster has defined the term *culture* as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a.). Understanding what workplace culture exists currently and whether it serves the goals and objectives a company is trying to achieve accounts for the closer scrutiny companies have begun to take in the wake of recent societal unrest.

Why culture matters

Culture matters because, often, it provides the foundation for connecting and operationalizing values. Culture acts as a determinant for identifying a group’s “tribe.” When functioning at its best, culture can also create a sense of belonging and accomplishment. Culture matters because forging a kinship via a shared environment influences how people talk, problem solve, perceive the world, vote, choose food, heal, perceive leaders, practice a faith, and so on. There is not one aspect of the ability to function day-to-day that is not rooted in culture.

Understanding cultural factors is essential in business because it serves as an opportunity to do the necessary work while crafting a welcoming work environment. Flourishing work cultures can function as a differentiator in the marketplace. This differentiation is a winning method for attracting highly talented employees and

transforming them into brand ambassadors. It is also the ingredient that attracts and retains customers and turns them into brand advocates. While culture is personal, it also is ever-changing. The literature suggests that companies fail when they do not embrace the notion that continuous improvement within their existing culture is as necessary as any other business lever for success (O'Keefe & Jee, 2020).

Furthermore, “set it and forget it” is a weak strategy for cultural impact. Stated plainly, culture is a continuous experience capable of constantly improving and should be viewed and measured similar to how other key performance indicators, such as safety, quality, cost, and delivery metrics, are assessed within a company.

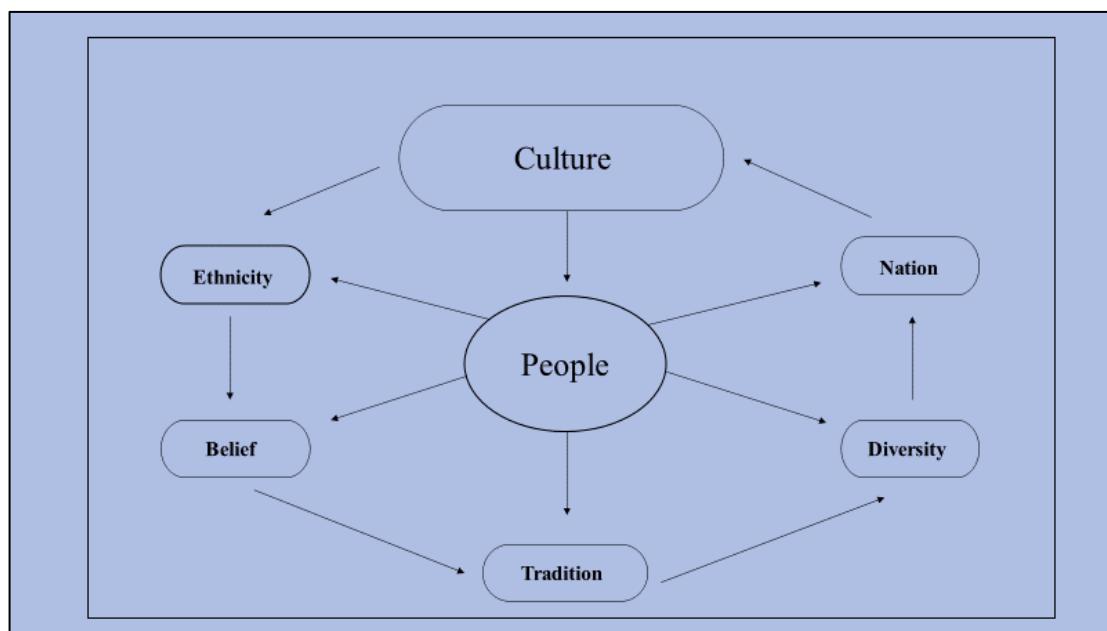
O'Keefe and Jee (2020) reported that employees and teams who most align with their organization's culture consistently perform higher on internal performance metrics than those who least align. Moreover, culture, done correctly, they reported, attracts world-class talent to organizations (O'Keefe & Jee, 2020). Increasingly, winning in business requires leveraging rather than inhibiting all that employees bring to the workplace.

Organizational culture

Given the explanation that there are individual, class or groups, and whole societal levels of culture, it is no wonder there is no homogeneous manner for how people present themselves within their workplace organizations. Schein (2017) stressed the necessity for understanding that the root of the difficulty in precisely defining culture

is due to people's different assumptions about what is essential. Therefore, it is the behavior within groups that reflects these biases and beliefs about what is important (Schein, 2017).

Figure 1 depicts the interconnectedness of human attributes present within the construct of culture. When one attribute dominates, conflict can arise. This "breaking of culture" will be discussed later in this review. The trick lies in balancing these dimensions and environments rich in emotional and social intelligence to provide an organizational advantage.



Source: Adapted from American Economic Association (2017)

Figure 1. Culture and Diversity

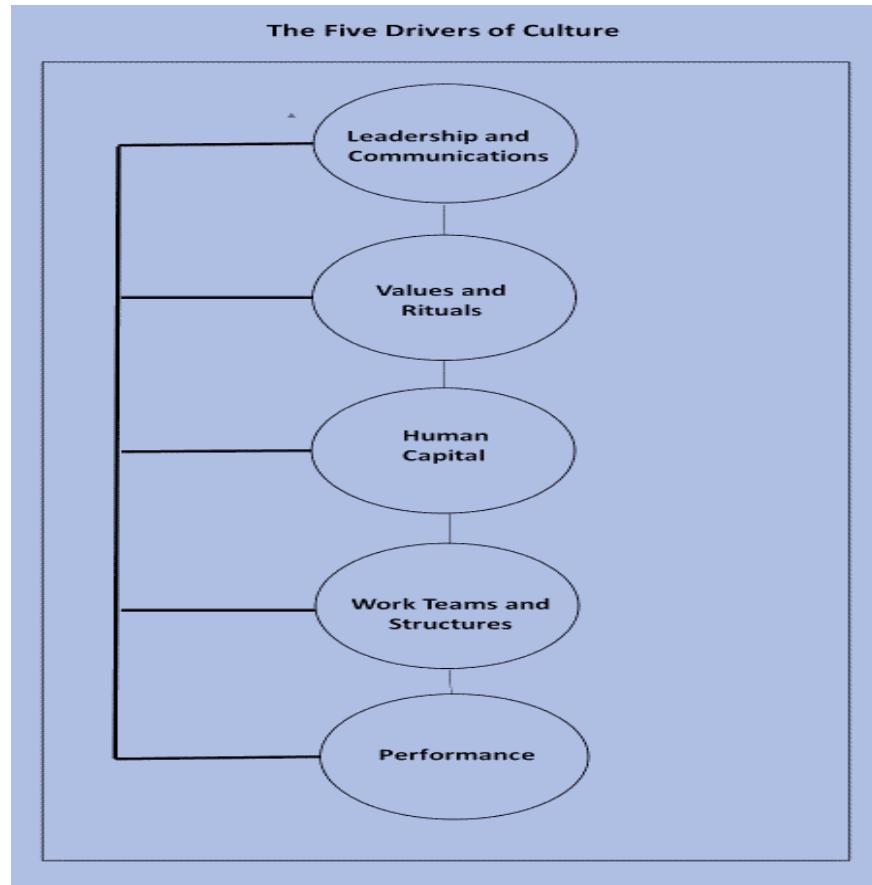
Recognized as the "Father of Organizational Culture," Schein (2017) stated that culture covers everything a group has learned since its evolution. Consider legacy

companies that have been around for over 100 years. In large part, this explains why companies who embark on culture change struggle so mightily in their efforts. They are confronting legacy cultural entrenchment. When considering organizational culture, Schein (2017) cautioned on the importance of recognizing the many dynamics which make up culture, including the following:

- Observed behavioral regularities when people interact
- Climate
- Formal rituals and celebrations
- Espoused values
- Formal philosophy
- Group norms
- Rules of the game
- Identity and images of self
- Embedded skills
- Habits of thinking, mental modes, or linguistic paradigms
- Shared meanings
- “Root metaphors” or integrating symbols. (Schein, 2017, pp. 3–5)

Thinking back to a recent qualitative assignment, one respondent emphatically stated that he believed culture and strategy were closely linked, comparing it to a marriage. O’Keefe and Jee (2020) offered the view that culture impacts performance, creates alignment, attracts world-class talent, and, most profoundly, is unique to every

organization. Managing and understanding company culture leads to a high commitment from employees who then believe in and live out the organization's purpose in their daily work. O'Keefe and Jee (2020) described the five drivers of company culture, as depicted in Figure 2.



Source: Adapted from O'Keefe and Jee (2020)

Figure 2. The Five Drivers of Culture

Culture and conflict

Culture connects people with their values, heritage, and traditions. This connection is accurate, whether referring to individuals, a class or group, or a nation. Most of all, culture is personal. Therefore, it should not surprise anyone that conflict is likely to

occur when others force deviation from established norms. The severity of friction depends on the degree to which people must shift and whether or not there is belief in the direction they must go to create said shift. This ability and desire to shift is one of the most compelling reasons why C-suite leaders should focus on their company's culture.

Hurdle (2018) spoke of getting to a place where it may become necessary to break culture. Conflict is alleviated when people can let go of their deep attachments. Within organizations, the long-held beliefs regarding methods for getting things done can take on a life of its own. Many leaders have gone into a new role with the mandate to change their company culture only to ultimately deem it an unachievable feat.

Hurdle (2018) described an instance when breaking with a culture made people think about how an intended celebration for many presented adverse effects for others. For example, during the lighting of fireworks on July 4th, a long-held tradition by many in America, a military person asked that the revelers consider military veterans who processed the loud pops from the fireworks as shots, which triggers post-traumatic stress disorder. The irony of the situation was seeing the men and women who serve their country experiencing trauma at the hands of the very people they answered the call to protect. This revelation was a powerful example of when a break with culture needed to occur (Hurdle, 2018).

It is worth mentioning that there are a few deal breakers for maintaining cultural harmony. Per Hurdle (2018), some common sticking points are listed below:

- Respect, don't we all agree on how to show respect?
- You're breaking "our custom."
- Everything is offensive these days.

On the first point, the possibility of creating confusion and raising the ire of an organization member is high, given that the meaning of respect is in the eye of the beholder. Demonstrating respect, or a lack thereof can mean different things depending on one's culture. For example, stepping on someone's shoes, failure to drink multiple rounds of alcoholic shots, and not removing one's hat when entering a church are all instances of disrespectful behavior in someone's culture. Likewise, looking into someone's eyes when talking to them is considered a sign of respect in some cultures, while in others, this gesture is deemed disrespectful.

The fireworks example covers the second point. The author noted that over 8,000 viewers tuned in to listen to the military employee's point about the not so joyous sound of firecrackers exploding.

The third point addresses the notion that many things are considered offensive these days. The ability to have real-time conversations about actions, practices, or spoken words deemed offensive is a practice in the workplace that must have traction from

the top. The willingness to see cultural conflicts and, when necessary, break the culture are ways to meet the resistance to differences rising, create opportunities to understand each other, and create new norms together (Hurdle, 2018).

To achieve optimal results, people often rely upon multiple segments of what it takes to complete an objective to deliver the greatest benefit. For example, flourishing and overall great health generally require the proper amounts of nourishment, physical exercise, sleep, mental wellbeing, and so on. The same can be said for achieving a flourishing organizational culture. In any respect, over-rotating runs the risk of upsetting the required balance and, thus, harmony within the organization's cultural web (Johnson & Scholes, 1997).

Figure 3 represents a model that incorporates several vital societal issues of today. Expressly, the problems of equality and inclusion are incorporated and speak to the ever-changing world and societal possibilities that companies must be willing to address to avoid the culture conflict within their organizational construct.



Source: Adapted from Lavitch (2021)

Figure 3. Six Elements to Access Your Company Culture

The importance of C-suite leaders understanding culture is two-fold. First, according to Lavitch (2021), a company-sanctioned culture is generally communicated via its mission or vision statement. Sometimes, however, an underlying tone within the organization influences employees at all levels and envelops new employees in an

unspoken way. These underlying tones can be positive or negative. Consider how the culture pendulum can swing within organizations:

- Positive behaviors related to engagement and commitment will create success.
- Counterproductive behaviors such as conflict avoidance, limited risk-taking, and misaligned motives will create frustration and diminished outcomes. (Lavitch, 2021)

Symptoms of a broken culture

As noted throughout this review, organizational or workplace culture is a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that members of an organization share. A combination of these elements influences the behavior of its members, who then rely on these values to guide their decisions and behaviors (Gregory et al., 2009).

Workplaces that are flourishing emit unmistakable vibes of productivity and centeredness that are customer- and employee-centric. These companies possess positive energy that is evident and an innate understanding of where they are going. Employee loyalty and high engagement are outputs of these positive energy and welcoming work environments.

However, the opposite is also true. It is also possible to enter an environment and ascertain very quickly that it has terrible vibes or that something is off. Broken cultures are not difficult to discern. If one pays close enough attention, broken cultures have telltale signs of dysfunction. However, when leaders are asked to define

what they believe their company's culture is, they rarely know (Lavitch, 2021). Understanding the company's culture is of the utmost importance, and not knowing what it is sometimes can manifest into avoidable obstacles, including an impact on key performance indicators such as absenteeism, low employee engagement, and silos, to name a few. Externally, the inability to attract and keep top talent, low customer confidence, loss of business, and difficulty achieving sustained organic growth are some of the ramifications of having a broken culture (Aubrey, 2012).

Interestingly, employees working within such organizations recognize this malaise and can feel its impact personally. For example, employee mental well-being is an often-overlooked byproduct of working in less than flourishing cultures. As a result, organizational members who feel powerless to make changes to improve their work environments opt to either mentally check out while working or leave their companies altogether.

Of the stressors associated with broken organizational cultures, one of the worst is how an organization behaves on the heels of a catastrophic event. Several recent events come to mind. First is the scandal associated with a well-known aircraft manufacturer, whose two plane crashes ended the lives of several hundred people. The public fall out and the resulting backlash against the company was not immediate, but when the then CEO testified in front of the United States Congress, things began to go badly for the company publicly. When some Congressional

members accused him of failing to reach out to the families of the deceased, judgment and speculation of a broken company culture began to surface.

Once the floodgates of criticism opened (directed primarily at the company and at the then CEO), alleged employee-leaked memos from within began to surface externally.

Shortly afterward, pundits opined that the entire leadership team and its CEO drove and presided over a broken and toxic culture. As the story unfolded, the CEO was ousted, including several existing C-suite and executive leadership team members.

Newspaper articles and newscasts pointed to shoddy engineering and a failure to appropriately communicate production system deficiencies as the root cause for the crashes. However, for many, the CEO and his C-suite were viewed as the ultimate culprits for a culture deemed lacking in accountability, having negligent leadership, and exemplifying corporate greed (Miletich & Kamb, 2019).

A second glaring example is the recent end of a tumult-filled American presidency which drove home the view that culture impacts everything we do. The administration (or cabinet) of the President of the United States is their C-suite, of sorts, as they are responsible for effectively running the United States. One's political affiliation notwithstanding, something in the former administration's leadership fostered a culture where segments of the United States experiencing heightened mistrust, incivility, violence, inequality, and damaged relationships have fully

surfaced. The result is a country whose cultural fabric has frayed and, in some instances, broken (Dimock & Gramlich, 2021).

Atchison (2014) further discussed broken organizational culture symptoms that reinforce the C-suite's responsibility for leading and managing company culture. This discussion, conducted from a proactive viewpoint, offered a list of signs to look for in an under-flourishing culture during the interview process, despite the limited information typically gleaned from such an exercise. These interviews intend to serve as "red flags" for would-be potential new employees. While one red flag should not cause concern, Atchison (2014) pointed out that five or more should prompt the candidate to abandon any idea of working at said company. These red flags include the following:

- No one talks about culture. Companies should try to sell you on their culture.
- The company posts its values on the wall. If you see this, do not bother with the interview. Instead, simply find the nearest exit and walk through it.
- If they ask you if you have a question, ask this: "How much time do you spend with your coworkers after 5 p.m. and doing what?" Acceptable answers include having a beer and playing softball. Lousy solutions include anything to do with work unless it happens only occasionally.
- Your interviewer talks about excellence. Every organization strives to succeed. That is a given. A company that emphasizes excellence may also hold its

employees to unachievable standards. Rather than focusing on your job, you will be worried about your job.

- This list should also have included shoddy or unfulfilled onboarding practices as these, too, are indications that the culture does not adequately invest in its ultimate competitive advantage: its people. (Atchison, 2014)

Linking Culture and Leadership

Leadership is yet another of those words that can be difficult to define because it means different things to different people. Yet, enter almost any domain, and there is a requirement for leadership. Parris and Peachey (2013) noted that leadership is one of the most comprehensively researched social influence processes in the behavioral sciences. Further, Barrow (1977) posited that the success of all economic, political, and organizational systems depends on the effective and efficient guidance of the leaders of these systems.

Leadership and development is a \$366 billion industry (Westfall, 2019), and companies spend enormous sums on training and development to create highly effective leaders. Additionally, leaders who are deemed highly effective are much sought after and, in many cases, command hefty compensation packages. Westfall (2019) explained that despite the staggering sums spent year after year on leadership programs, most fail for several reasons.

First, these programs are heavy on content when it is the context that really matters. There can be no “one size fits all” when the size of the organization, its culture, and leadership structure are considered. Second, asking leadership development participants to reflect and study the teachings of other leaders provides no opportunity to put those reflections into action. Martin (2021) provided an excellent example when he stated that knowing all the rules of boxing matters not at all when someone is about to punch you in the face. His point is well-taken in that leaders have to put reflection into action. Martin contends in the boxing example that leadership is a verb discovered in action and demonstrated when applied. Leadership is not merely a theory.

The third reason leadership programs fail results from underestimating the organization’s culture. The organizational mindset, especially if its antibodies lurk within, can present the most difficult threat to positive change. It is not uncommon to spend the most significant amount of time dedicated to trying to convince the organization that change is required and then to constantly course-correct when, inevitably, attempts are made to revert to the old way of doing things. In an instance such as this, the tone at the top is critical. The C-suite, in particular, has to commit to fully understanding any sacred beliefs within the existing culture and work to address any obstacles beforehand to avoid costly battles.

Fourth is failing to measure progress or the lack thereof. Understanding how to measure the progress and effectiveness of self and other leaders in the area of soft skills can prove difficult to quantify. The key here is to watch for leadership actions that provide clues as to cultural context and understanding within the organization (Martin, 2021).

Culture and leadership are inextricably interwoven in the workplace. What then is leadership? Greenleaf (1970) posited that leadership, like culture, can be viewed from different perspectives, such as individual, organizational, or societal contexts.

According to multiple researchers, including Barrow (1977), Cyert (2006) and Pleske and Wilson (2001), “Leadership is a skill used to influence followers in an organization to work enthusiastically towards goals identified explicitly for the common good” (as cited in Pawar et al., 2020, p. 64). Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez (2007) and Kotter (2001) further described the contributions of leaders in organizations: “Great leaders create an organizational vision, articulate the vision to the supporters, create a shared vision, develop a path to achieve the vision, and guide their organizations in new directions (as cited in Pawar et al., 2020, p. 64).

Leadership, in this researcher’s view, is a privilege. However, leadership is also very complex. Demonstrating competence and effectiveness are table stakes for leadership roles, yet achieving these things can be very difficult and, for some, elusive. Northouse (2016) summed up the process of leadership as a series of interactions

between leaders and those they have a responsibility to lead, known as their followers, through the use of power, authority, or influence to get others to achieve goals. Historically, the relationship between leader and follower has been constructed via a hierarchy. The leader is perched at the top with the follower in the role of the subordinate. This construct is the exact hierarchy in the C-suite relationship to the rest of the organization.

Increasingly, there has been a shift in which employee engagement dictates more relationship-based interactions between the leaders and their followers. This shift has occurred partly out of a necessity for companies to gain or maintain their competitive advantage, employees' desire to feel connected to its mission, and, most importantly, employees' need to feel valued. This relationship-based type of leadership is best explained via the leader-member exchange theory (LMX).

LMX theory is relationship-based and rooted in the belief that leaders and followers have a relationship that could yield advantages. LMX stresses the dyadic relationship between leader and follower and the formation of in-groups, where the relationships are positive, and out-groups, where there is some disconnect in the dyadic construct between leader and follower (Northouse, 2016). On a macro-level, C-suite members should covet and seek to foster scenarios with employees and among themselves that produce mainly in-groups. While out-groups can provide benefits by bringing about

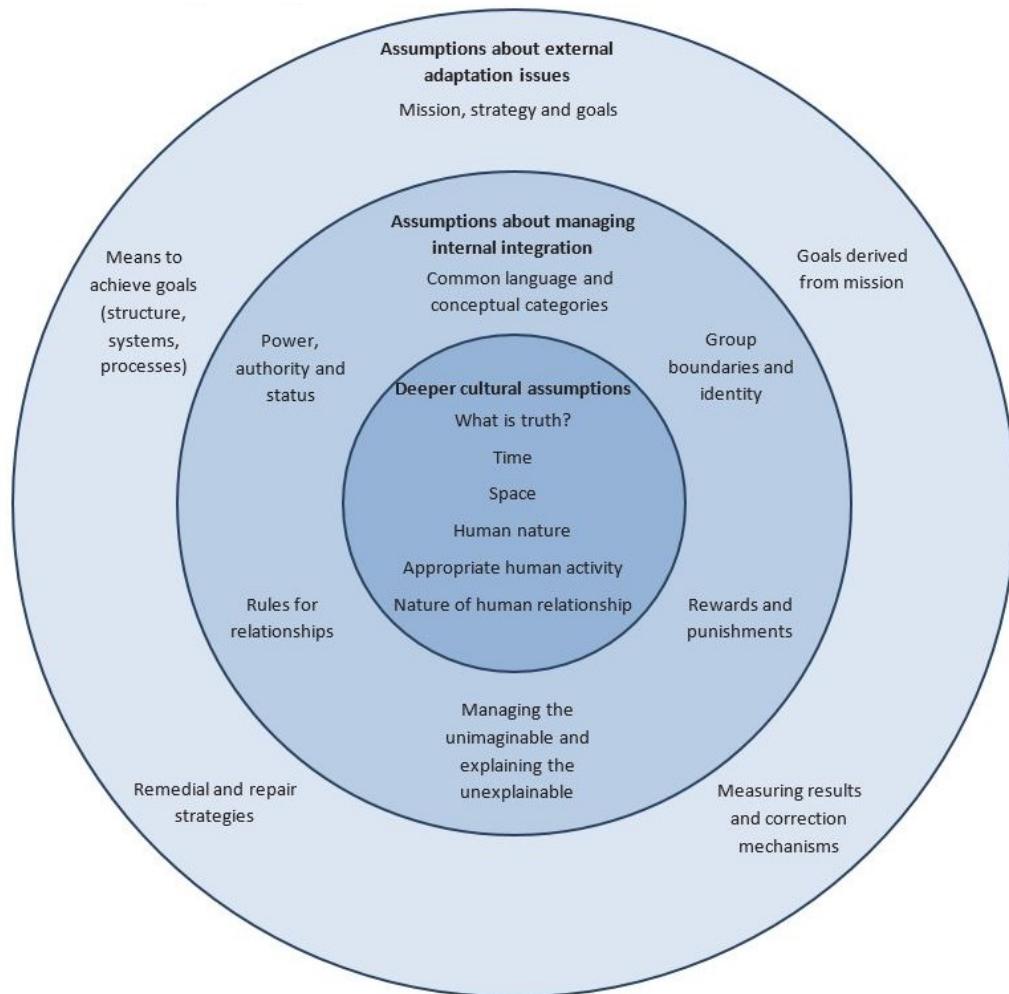
necessary change within organizations, a collective out-group can sow discord and hinder an environment for organizational flourishing.

One constant related to definitions of leadership lies in its continued evolution. For example, Bass and Bass's (2008) handbook on leadership has undergone four editions since its original publication, written by Ralph Melvin Stogdill, in 1974. Nevertheless, their view of leadership has remained constant in the context of the leader's responsibility to behave appropriately and accept ownership to foster the kind of interactions with followers that benefit the organization (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Having worked within an organization that prided itself on operating under a team concept, experience has shown this researcher that there is always a leader or leaders. A leader exists even if the role is not stated explicitly, and that the behavior of said leader or leaders impacts the success of the team and organization. Understanding and leveraging the best leadership within an organization is as important as understanding and leveraging the best of culture because both impact its success. Those who lead, particularly the C-suite, occupy positions where others depend on them for consistent and effective guidance (Barrow, 1977).

This link between culture and leadership is well-illustrated in Edgar Schein's (2010) model of organizational culture in Figure 4. The amalgamation of culture and leadership appear to suggest that both are needed for an organization to achieve

sustained success. Unfortunately, this researcher has experience working in organizations where both were poorly executed. The result sometimes yielded short-term successes; however, the longevity and steadiness those leaders longed for rarely materialized.



Source: Adapted from Renando (2010)

Figure 4. Edgar Schein's Organizational Culture Model

C-Suite Leadership Shapes the Organization's Culture

Today, the simple adage “actions speak louder than words” has never been truer.

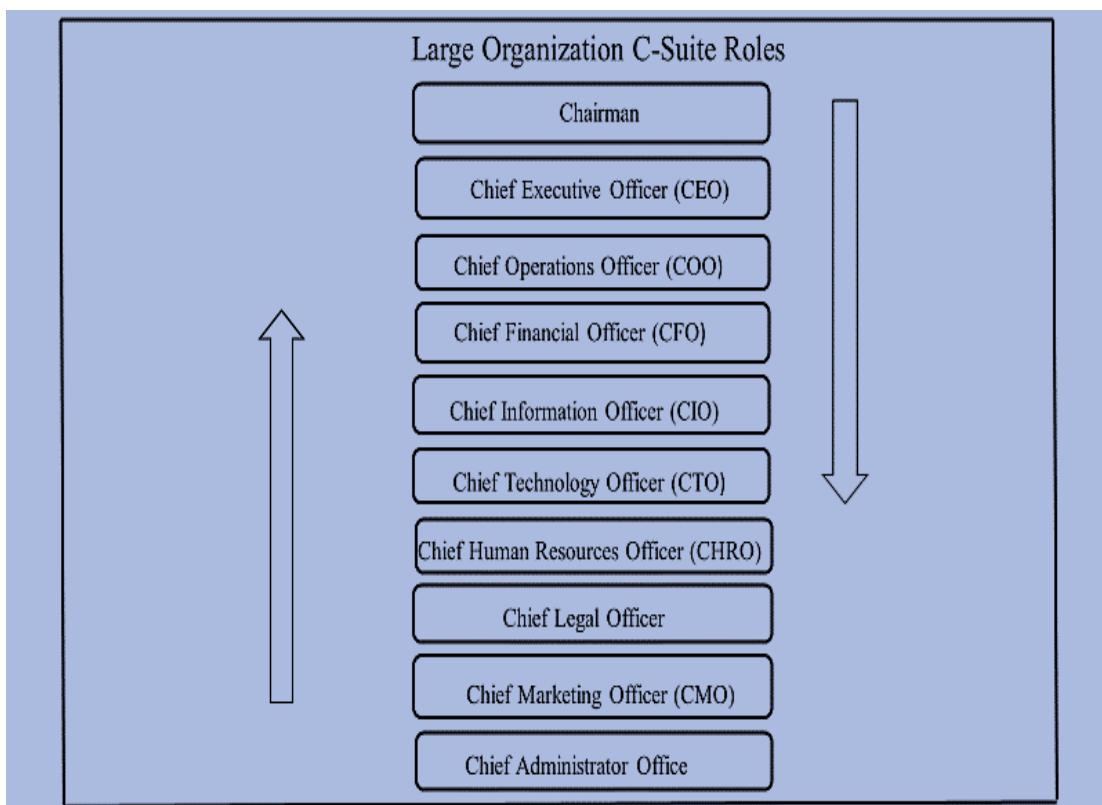
Leadership requires those charged with leading others, particularly within organizations who ultimately report to its shareholders, to operate at a level that is above reproach. Given the complexities and priorities within a business that sometimes involves difficult and unpleasant decision-making, effective leadership is often not a cut-and-dried experience. An elite squad of decision-makers who occupy the highest leadership positions is the C-suite within corporations. Reaching this level for many executives is proof positive that one has “made it.”

What is the C-suite?

The C-suite is the highest-ranking senior executive(s) in an organization. The “C” represents the word *chief*, which can be found in many corporate titles. These leaders, also known as “C-level” executives (Cassidy, 2018), are typically A-players (high performing and high potential executives) who are appointed to the CEO’s leadership team. C-level executives head various businesses and functions within the company or organization and, collectively, they set the strategic direction for the company. There is a great deal of responsibility entrusted to these members, and the larger and more complex the company, the greater the responsibility. However, there also are significant benefits associated with occupying these positions.

Reaching this career echelon typically requires a plethora of experience and finely-honed leadership skills. In the past, many C-level executives relied on functional

know-how and technical skills to climb the corporate ladder's lower rungs. However, most have now cultivated the more visionary perspectives required to make sound upper management decisions. As a result, the number of C-level positions varies, depending on factors such as a company's size, mission, and sector (Bloomenthal, 2021). Figure 5 depicts what the leadership structure might look like within larger companies.



Source: Adapted from Bloomenthal (2021)

Figure 5. C-Suite Leadership Structure

Within older, more hierarchical companies, these members enjoy privileges and a degree of latitude not experienced by those in subordinate positions. They also are in

roles predominantly occupied by men in institutions that, historically, operated based upon command and control. Encouraging the free expression of feelings, bringing one's authentic self to work, and expressing a spirit of inclusiveness was not top of mind. Listening to the opinions of those more deeply embedded within the organization was neither welcomed nor tolerated. A rigidity signaled a singular focus exclusively on achieving business objectives and an implicit, implied directive to leave one's authenticity outside the workplace.

While choosing the appropriate Cs (C-suite members) is critical for executing business strategy, suitable Cs also are necessary to lead and sustain flourishing company cultures. Organizations are beginning to recognize the need for increased attention and understanding of other vital factors that make up an effective and sustained leadership culture.

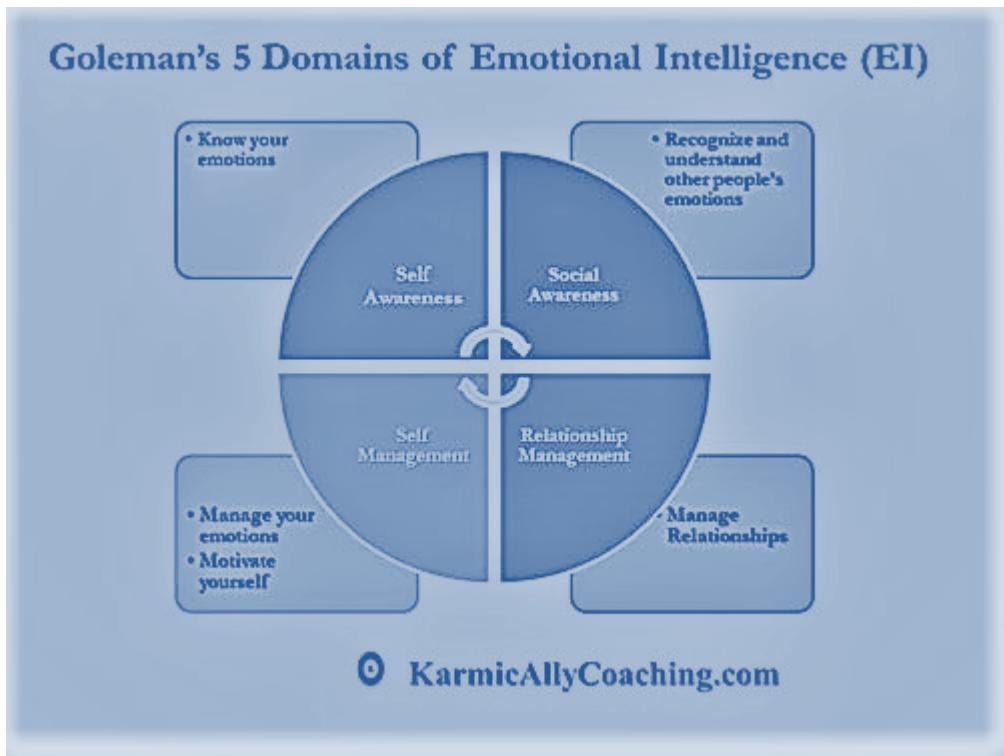
The need for C-suite emotional and social intelligence

Executive leadership should fully encompass responsible cultural leadership. The first step is to know and appropriately lead oneself, and doing so requires emotional intelligence. The theory of emotional intelligence was created by Salavoy and Mayer (1990) and made popular by Goleman's (1995) book, *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman (1995) defined emotional intelligence (EI) as the ability to perceive emotions, access and generate feelings, assist thought, understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and reflectively regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Bawany (2015) noted that the early definitions of social

intelligence influenced how emotional intelligence was later conceptualized. This statement harkens back to the explanation that culture evolved from the social gatherings of groups.

Goleman (1995) and Bawany (2015) shared their belief that leadership is all about envisioning the future and energizing the organization, including the team, to achieve that vision. Leaders need an array of emotional and social intelligence competencies to be successful. The good news is that these can be developed with the appropriate training and coaching. Emotional and social intelligence competencies can contribute significantly to a leader's success.

Increasingly, companies recognize that leadership factors are crucial to their organizational effectiveness because, ultimately, the people within the organization must translate corporate strategy and business goals into action. Goleman (1995) considered EI the most significant single predictor of success in the workplace. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that having only cognitively intelligent leaders in top leadership roles is not enough. Treating employees in a manner that makes them feel heard, valued, and welcomed makes for healthy organizations and proves good for business. Figure 6 depicts Goleman's Five Domains of Emotional Intelligence.



Source: Adapted from Goleman (1995)

Figure 6. Goleman's 5 Domains of Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Building upon Goleman's (1995) work, Bawany (2015) recognized the importance of emotionally intelligent leaders possessing humility. It is humility that paves the way for incorporating these additional emotionally intelligent leader traits. Bawany (2015) identified the following characteristics as elements of emotional intelligence:

- Self-Awareness—The skill of being aware of and understanding emotions as they occur and evolve. For example, it is wrong to think of emotions as either positive or negative. Instead, leaders should think of them as appropriate or inappropriate. Effective self-assessment of feelings and emotions will help to improve confidence and self-esteem. People with high self-awareness or self-regard have

an accurate picture of their strengths and weaknesses. They enjoy their strengths and acknowledge weaknesses with recognition but not shame. Shame paralyzes. Acceptance leads people to correct what they can and adapt to what cannot be repaired. Leaders with high self-awareness will hire people whose skills complement their own. Conversely, leaders who have an unrealistic picture of their strengths and weaknesses have a lower chance of hiring the best people.

- Assertiveness—The ability to express one's feelings, convictions, and opinions non-destructively in a manner that generally fosters open communication. This may include pushing boundaries to evoke a more open and creative forum among team members. People who score high on assertiveness can clearly and confidently articulate their ideas. Unfortunately, assertiveness is often confused with aggressiveness. Aggressiveness is an attempt to coerce and usually creates anxiety in the listener, while assertiveness communicates that both parties are safe (i.e., "I'm not trying to hurt you, and I won't let you hurt me.").
- Empathy—The ability to be aware of and understand how others feel. It is a key component of people-oriented and participative leadership. Empathy includes being sensitive to coworkers' feelings, concerns, and needs and seeing the world from their perspective.
- Independence—People who score high on freedom are self-reliant thinkers. This competency emphasizes the importance of making decisions independently and looking to themselves as the prime vehicle for decision making. They may get consultations from others to ensure they have all the information and ideas they

need, but when the time comes, they make up their minds. Conversely, people who score low on independence are overly reliant upon other people's advice.

- Communication—The ability to state what leaders want and expect from others, to clearly express thoughts and ideas, and to maintain a precise and constant flow of information. Leaders who score low communicate more discreetly—they tend to work on a “need to know” basis. They are less likely to present or explain their ideas and viewpoints thoroughly or to pass along information. These leaders may underestimate the importance of communication. They may not recognize that inadequate communication can reduce effectiveness and cause ambiguity and unnecessary anxiety. Leaders with higher scores sincerely believe in the importance of keeping others informed. These leaders will spend time clearly defining expectations and articulating their ideas, thoughts, and views. Very high scores may indicate a tendency to talk indiscriminately; these leaders may not recognize that overwhelming people with information may make it harder for them to accomplish their work. Hence, it is critical for the leader to ensure that the message is delivered in the right manner and in the most effective medium or channel to ensure that it is well received.
- Feedback—The ability to let others know, in a straightforward fashion, how they are perceived and how well they have performed. This transparency is crucial for all leaders who must demonstrate this managerial coaching competency. Leaders who score low are likely to give others little direct information about their performance. They may be concerned about hurting others' feelings or assume

people know how they are doing and need no critique. Their feedback may be so indirect that the recipient does not understand their message. They may find that they have neither encouraged good work nor addressed performance problems.

The effective leader realizes the need to give positive feedback when appropriate and address inadequate performance or inappropriate behavior. People who score high provide frank and direct feedback to others and let them know what they really think. Individuals with very high scores may appear overly critical and blunt; they may create defensive reactions or find that their message is discounted because of how they deliver it.

As people grow more vocal in insisting on the kind of treatment they expect, emotional and social intelligence competencies quickly become table stakes for success. The current push is for organizations to understand the competencies their C-suite lacks to begin the process of developing, hiring, and pivoting, where necessary.

A new kind of workplace intelligence

There has been an increased focus and importance placed upon leaders to increase their effectiveness in the workplace. To do this, they must successfully meld the nuances of emotional and social intelligence with the other competencies needed to run successful businesses. This need has led to a new form of intelligence. Moral intelligence originated from Lennick and Kiel (2011) and is defined as the capacity to understand right from wrong and behave based on the value believed to be right.

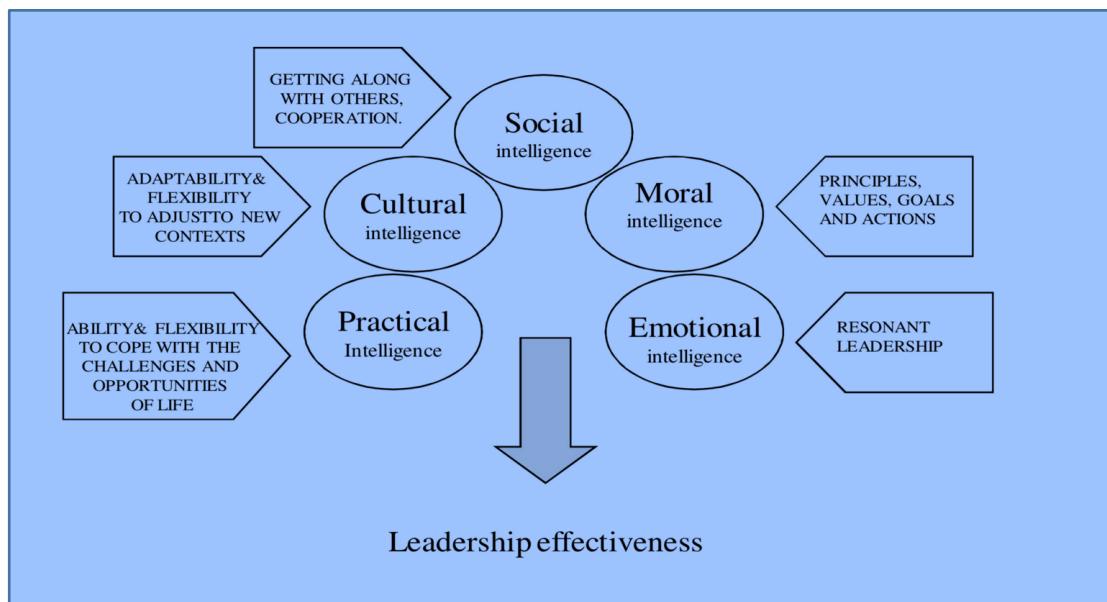
Moral intelligence is newer and less studied than the more established cognitive, emotional, and social intelligences, but it has great potential to improve our understanding of learning and behavior. Moral intelligence refers to the ability to apply ethical principles to personal goals, values, and actions.

Lennick and Kiel (2005) made a case for business leaders to understand and nurture workplace culture, noting that sound leaders demonstrate moral intelligence when they understand that doing what is right morally and doing what is right for their business are intertwined. The construct of moral intelligence consists of four competencies related to integrity, three to responsibility, two to forgiveness, and one to compassion. In addition, morally intelligent leaders are unapologetic in their willingness to incorporate behaviors that provide support, lend respect, and exercise care into their other leadership competencies (Beheshtifar et al., 2011).

Moral intelligence and emotional intelligence are two types of competencies that C-suite leaders often ignore because they are examples of soft skills that are difficult to measure (Goleman, 1998). In its purest form, moral intelligence seeks to make the interaction between the environment and the individual functional (Belohlavek, 2007). Moral intelligence enables C-suite leaders to conduct business with a compass (Beheshtifar et al., 2011), and this competency aligns most closely with values and principles, which are components of culture. This distinction is significant and should

not be confused with cultural intelligence, which allows for the adaptation and contextualization of differences to manifest.

Toole's (2010) Quotient Behavioral Leadership Model (Figure 7) depicts the model's various facets that promote the need for intelligence in multiple leadership areas and has served as suggested learning for inexperienced and experienced managers (as cited in Beheshtifar et al., 2011). According to Toole (2010), C-suite leaders have an opportunity to learn and live its tenets and subsequently cascade that learning throughout the organization (as cited in Beheshtifar et al., 2011). When managing behaviors, Toole (2010) contended that there are five types of intelligence: practical, cultural, social, emotional, and moral (as cited in Beheshtifar et al., 2011).



Source: Adapted from Beheshtifar et al. (2011)

Figure 7. Quotient Behavioral Leadership Model

The model highlights emotional, social, and moral intelligence, discussed earlier in this dissertation. The importance of understanding culture and its leadership role was also discussed. Practical intelligence is a significant addition and one for consideration because it involves common sense and the ability to help solve real-world, practical problems (Hedlund, 2020). Practical intelligence is a particularly useful behavioral attribute to have as a leader because it speaks to the ability to help solve the kind of issues that invariably arise when dealing with people within an organization. Practical intelligence differs from the type gleaned from a book and relies on intuition or “street smarts.” Technical or textbook solutions often do not apply when managing and leading people. How often have employees acknowledged that a leader may be book smart yet clueless in understanding the missing people component?

The Move Toward Flourishing

Positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals, institutions, and communities to thrive. It is founded on three central tenets: positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Further, positive psychology promotes the well-being of individuals, institutions, and society (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This study focused on how the positive conduct of top leadership drives organizational culture well-being or flourishing. To achieve a state of flourishing, leaders must embrace a mindset that seeks to get the best from people. Therefore, focusing on their

strengths as espoused in positive psychology theory is an important first step for C-suite leaders while on their journey to drive flourishing organizational cultures.

Flourishing, like culture and leadership, has multiple meanings. Traditional psychology focuses on the alleviation of human suffering. Later came the positive psychology movement, led by Seligman (2011), which helped define what is needed to get the most from life for individuals, communities, and nations. Seligman's (2011) work challenged individuals to consider what is required to cultivate talents, build deep, lasting relationships with others, feel pleasure, and contribute meaningfully to the world. What can we do as humans to evolve from simply focusing on avoiding the perils of human suffering (depression is an example of this) to get the most out of life? Seligman (2011) guided his work by addressing optimism, motivation, character, and well-being. What is it, he asked, that allows us to arrive at this optimal state of flourishing (Seligman, 2011)?

By contrast, the Longman Business Directory (2021) has succinctly defined flourishing as “a business or industry that is flourishing is very successful and is making a profit.” Unfortunately, this definition leaves much to interpretation because it does not include any indication of what “very successful” means. There is also no distinction regarding the profit level a company must realize to achieve business success. Is it earning one dollar of profit or one billion dollars? Longman’s definition might prove problematic for the metrics-conscious business leader because it is broad,

somewhat cryptic, rather vague, and omits any indication of the inputs required to flourish.

This chasm between the theory of positive psychology and a business dictionary definition of flourishing is precisely the conundrum in which many companies find themselves today. The companies deemed to be the best culturally have figured out how to meld their employees' cultural nuances into an organizational gumbo that works for everyone, top to bottom, and translates into company wellness or flourishing. The leadership tone at the top is evident, and they do not rest on any laurels; they continue to improve and grow.

A recurring theme that emerged from this research process centers around our differences as human beings and the behaviors that top leadership should demonstrate to harness these nuances and foster flourishing organizational cultures. For the purposes of this research, flourishing is defined in the context of a business organization. According to Best Christian Workplaces Institute (2020), a flourishing organizational culture is one in which there is a culture of continuous growing mutual trust, transparency, and unity. People enjoy coming to work from top to bottom because they believe in the organization's mission and believe in each other. Flourishing organizations require a fundamental shift in mindsets, values, and consequent behaviors (Flourishing Organisations, n.d.). They also require continuity of purpose that does not halt when leaders and circumstances change.

Our unique gumbo (Q. Jones, personal communication, October 3, 2017) is sometimes of little consequence once we enter the workplace. There is an expectation to conform, adapt, and abide by the rules of the road of the company for whom we work. Employees are expected to mold themselves to fit the existing culture and not the other way around.

Though extreme and archaic, to be sure, an illustrative example of the mandated separation of work and self is in the case of the expectations during the early days of the Ford Motor Company and the rules it imposed upon its employees. Ford created a division called the Ford Sociological Department. Employees were expected to keep their homes clean and submit to questions regarding marital relationships, alcohol consumption, and spending habits. In addition, employees were forbidden to speak any language at work other than English. Henry Ford wanted his workers to be model Americans, and to his way of thinking, this is only accomplished if they abandoned their culture and adopted his.

An overarching reason for the control was to retain employees and address the massive turnover created by performing such monotonous, dull, and dangerous work. To ensure employees followed these rules and stayed in line, the Ford Sociological Department envoys first blacklisted employees who did not adhere to them, thus barring them from any promotions. Next, the employee's pay would drop from five

dollars per day to two dollars and thirty-four cents. Essentially, they were fired if employees did not learn to speak English, get married, and become model Americans. This form of tyranny or paternalism created a condition of employment at Ford Motor Company that demonstrated intolerance and did not allow for any culture that was not Henry Ford's idea of the American model (Ballaban, 2014).

Thankfully, these practices are from a bygone era. Today, employees increasingly expect to work within an environment that allows them to bring their whole selves to work. The dilemma for many companies is how best to harness and meld their employees' culture and purpose into one that is collective and fulfilling—one that is flourishing. Flourishing involves a continual state of growth for the entire organization, and this leadership mindset has to emanate from the C-suite. Peterson (2008) discussed Seligman's (2011) differentiation of psychology, which seeks to relieve human suffering and primarily focuses on addressing weaknesses and problems, to positive psychology. The primary interest is identifying and building mental assets or strengths (Peterson, 2008).

This study focuses on understanding how to move organizational culture from unhealthy to healthy to flourishing—and whether positive C-suite behaviors make a difference. To accomplish this task and create a culture that effectively accommodates the collective employee differences within the confines of their businesses is the equation that more and more business leaders seek to solve.

According to a quotation from one employee at internet cloud computing giant Google, which took the top position on Business Insider's *25 Global Companies with the Best Workplace Cultures*, "The most positive thing about the culture and environment is that so many different types of people from different cultures are getting together to work on something and share their ideas" (Hoff, 2021).

What makes organizations flourish?

Trustworthy environments can create emotional safety, depending on the level of trust in oneself and others (Vincent, 1995). Trust, anchored by other emotional intelligence behavioral traits such as honesty, a clearly articulated and compelling vision, the willingness to show vulnerability, transparency, and cooperation, represent some of the feedback gleaned from recent C-suite interviews regarding why they felt organizational cultures they admired excelled beyond others. Trust surfaced again and again. Covey (n.d.) conducts Speed of Trust courses, teaching that trust is the foundation necessary for building solid teams. The course also emphasizes how important it is to preserve trust once it is earned and how easily it can be lost with just one act (Covey, n.d.). Too often in business, the betrayal of trust centers around competition for raises, the desire for recognition or advancement, or simply working with someone who behaves as if they are always right about everything, which can produce distrust. When this occurs, any existing trust erodes, and if none existed previously, it is not likely to develop. Most of all, employees need to believe they can trust leadership. Many companies measure this component in employee surveys. "I

trust the leadership of my company” is a survey prompt now commonly found on corporate employee engagement survey tools administered by Kenexa, a third-party IBM firm (Folton, 2014, p. 8).

Impediments to organizational flourishing

Ultimately, top leadership is accountable for leading the organization and executing company objectives. One of the most important impediments to flourishing organizations is when the leader may possess some but not all of the required attributes for leading effectively. As the final decision-makers, leaders sometimes make bad decisions. In business, these leadership missteps can hinder success. However, too often, accountability is slow to reach this level, if it happens at all. Instead, it is more often than not meted out within the lower hierarchies of an organization. Employees witness these phenomena, which sets the tone for how they engage. For this reason, a lack of organizational trust acts as a huge detractor to creating foundational organizational strength.

One common misstep, for example, is advising the organization of expectations and what is needed to achieve success, only to say and do things that are the opposite. Dvorak and Ott (2015) conducted focus groups and found that mixed messages to managers stifled the innovation that company leaders claimed to want. Top managers said they were reluctant to take risks required for ideation innovation because their company did not reward risk-taking; managers feared that failure would be fatal to their careers. A typical response was, “I’d rather just stay under the radar and do the

same things as last year because that almost ensures I'll be here in five years. But if I take a risk, I might not be here next year." The ability to fail is something that culturally superior companies encourage and welcome. During a visit to the LinkedIn headquarters several years ago, one of its employees spoke of company-wide televised town hall meetings where examples of failures were discussed, not to embarrass or mete out punishment; instead, the examples were used as a teachable learning point for the rest of the organization. The employee then explained that others do not make the same mistakes and understand why what was attempted previously had failed. This type of behavior is worlds apart within more traditional, hierarchical organizations.

Another type of mixed message involves an example of call center employees and how they are supposed to treat customers. Company leaders often tell their employees, "Customers come first, so take the time you need to ensure you're solving customers' problems." This proclamation sounds good in theory, but in practice, most call center employees' performance is rated based on their "handle time," or the average number of calls they complete in an hour. If employees don't meet a standard rate, they become labeled poor performers regardless of how well they solved customers' problems. But some organizations get leadership and communication right: A major insurance company, for example, celebrated a call center employee who stayed on the line with a customer for more than an hour because that customer was going through a difficult time and needed someone with whom to talk. The call

center recognized the representative for providing exemplary service, demonstrating its commitment to its customers, and exhibiting behavior consistent with its purpose (Dvorak & Ott, 2015).

Locke (2018) posited that setting goals for managers and other employees can lead to dishonesty or cheating. Cheating, in this case, means claiming better performance than one actually achieved. Locke (2018) did not suggest that goals should not exist; he argued instead that the process involved in setting these goals is at issue. Further, he said it is human nature for people to try and make themselves look good, and for this reason, objectives are necessary and a great way to ensure the organization is productive. The position Locke (2018) took on the role leaders play in this scenario presents an interesting angle. Not surprisingly, the article points to a consistent practice with ethical conduct. However, nowhere does the article connect the need for demonstrated positive leadership attributes by the C-suite or tone setting as a deterrent for cheating. Sadly, the prospect of hefty bonuses, board of directors, and shareholder approval can result in C-suite greed as well.

This message Locke (2018) conveyed in this study is an example of leadership mistakes resulting in ethical stumbles. Motives that are sometimes self-serving by the C-suite, whether they present themselves in the form of shareholder care, board expectations, or the prospect of enormous pay incentives, are provided as common reasons how organizations cheat (Locke, 2018).

In this researcher's experience, tone-deafness to anything beyond pleasing board members has manifested into the form of neglect that Locke (2018) discussed. This neglect of the organization or its followers is also why organizational culture eventually erodes. When C-suite behavior appears to embrace and model a particular leadership direction fully, the rest of the organization quickly realizes it had better play by these rules and promptly follows suit. Therefore, the tone at the top dictates the tone for the rest of the organization.

Gaps in the Literature

A simple Google search for C-suite behavior identifies articles written for the *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, and informational blogs. The subjects ranged from providing definitions and explanations of the psychology of a C-suite to discussing the link between ethical behavior and the C-suite's behavior. One such article, "C-Level Executives Need These Traits for Success" (Turning Point, 2018), is based on research that analyzed a dataset that included more than 18,000 C-suite executives. The research was divided such that the data captured responses to help shed light in determining 1) the behaviors or traits which help aspiring executives move into C-suite roles and 2) what helps an executive remain in at the C-level for the long haul (Turning Point, 2018). For example, the study found that decision-making, engagement for impact, reliability, boldness, and adaptation were the critical enablers for C-suite entry and longevity (Turning Point, 2018). Though hardly scholarly by

nature, these articles mainly offer opinions and advice regarding C-suite composition and function.

A similar search was launched combing through various academic journals to find information regarding the impact positive C-suite behaviors and attributes have in fostering a flourishing organizational culture. Unfortunately, there was scant scholarly information that specifically discussed C-suite leadership behaviors and its organizational culture impact. As a result, a search was conducted using keywords such as leadership, ethics, ethical compliance within corporations, flourishing, organizational, culture, and C-suite definition to find information that offered some viewpoint regarding the research subject. It became necessary to pivot to broaden the search to include the fields of leadership, culture, flourishing, and organizational leadership. From these vantage points, information was then gleaned from respected scholars that will be applied to the C-suite leadership subject. The writings of scholars such as Schein (1990, 2004, 2017), Northouse (2016), Goleman (1995), Avolio and Gardner (2005), and others were consulted for the research of this project. Despite this literature consultation, available information on the key positive behaviors C-suite leaders need to foster flourishing environments effectively is almost non-existent from a scholarly perspective.

Therefore, the opportunity to interview C-suite members, CEOs, and C-Level leaders to gain perspectives from their personal experience on which specific positive

attributes are the most effective for creating flourishing organizational cultures fills the existing gap of available artifacts on the subject. This additional insight could prove invaluable given how much the leadership landscape has shifted, particularly after the onset of COVID-19.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter walks the reader through the methodology used to conduct this research.

The intent is to provide insight and information regarding the research question and sub-questions, design, setting and participants, data collection procedures, and coding process.

Definition

The purpose of asking an academic research question is to conduct an inquiry into a specific content area and/or to prove or disprove a hypothesis. This examination explored the subject of C-suite behaviors at the most senior levels within public, for-profit companies and how their positive behaviors drive flourishing organizational cultures.

This study was a qualitative inquiry that used grounded theory techniques to explore the research question utilizing appreciative inquiry interviews of C-suite leaders from eight different companies across multiple industries and contexts. This study intentionally and necessarily included the voice of the respondents, the reflexivity of the researcher, a thorough investigation of the relevant literature, a complex description of the research question, its potential contribution to the existing academic and practitioner literature, and, perhaps most importantly, a compelling call to change at the senior-most level of organizations (Creswell, 2013).

Rationale for Research Approach

The methodological goal of this study was to speak directly to members of C-suites from publicly traded, for-profit companies to probe, explore, and understand their first-hand views on how their positive behaviors drive flourishing organizational cultures. While it has been generally acknowledged that the top leadership of any organization influences its business outcomes, the impact of positive C-suite behaviors on the cultural environments they lead is scarce. Therefore, this examination called for the collection and analysis of interview data about pertinent research questions centered around C-suite leadership in the context of this study.

A series of twelve in-depth interview questions were developed and posed to twelve respondents to understand this topic in a manner that allowed for leaders' firsthand views. In addition, each interview participant was asked during semi-structured interview questions ranging from why C-suite members chose their roles/companies to what they viewed as the most critical positive behaviors a C-Level member must possess. The Interview Guide containing the survey questions used for the study is noted in Appendix A.

The interview questions were developed using an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach (Barrett & Fry, 2005) to encourage participant examination to focus primarily on how positive behaviors impact an organization instead of concentrating on what was wrong or broken. For example, one question focused on toxicity to encourage the

participants to differentiate between behavior(s) that drive flourishing versus toxic environments.

The questions were deliberately open-ended and created intentionally to allow participants to respond utilizing various means of expression, including storytelling, to provide vivid examples and stories. This open-ended approach is another characteristic of appreciative inquiry (AI), which seeks to discover or explore (Barrett & Frye, 2005).

Conducting a qualitative study represented the best approach for delving into leader experiences while allowing for story-telling and real-time examples based upon their collective years of experience occupying C-suite roles. This approach consisted of interviews with the C-suite, including its CEO.

Since this dissertation aimed to probe and explore senior leaders' lived experiences in creating flourishing organizational cultures, grounded theory was the best methodological approach. Furthermore, using this approach encouraged participants to tap into their collective years of experience occupying C-suite roles to share stories of demonstrated success in creating flourishing cultures.

In interviewing CEOs and their C-level executives, the purpose of the study was to understand how they and others in their roles behave to influence the environments in

which they and those they lead function. For this reason, a quantitative analysis would not have been appropriate or sufficient in creating the vivid, compelling, and inspirational description(s) that a grounded/generative approach would bring forth. This view is supported by Ravitch and Carl (2016), who posited that qualitative research is best served when specific phenomena (in this case, flourishing organizational cultures) are observed through the lens of experiences and views as observed by its respondents (in this case, C-suite members). Therefore, this study utilized an inductive approach in which the interview questions provided the mechanism to understand best how respondents experience the process of leading from the C-suite (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

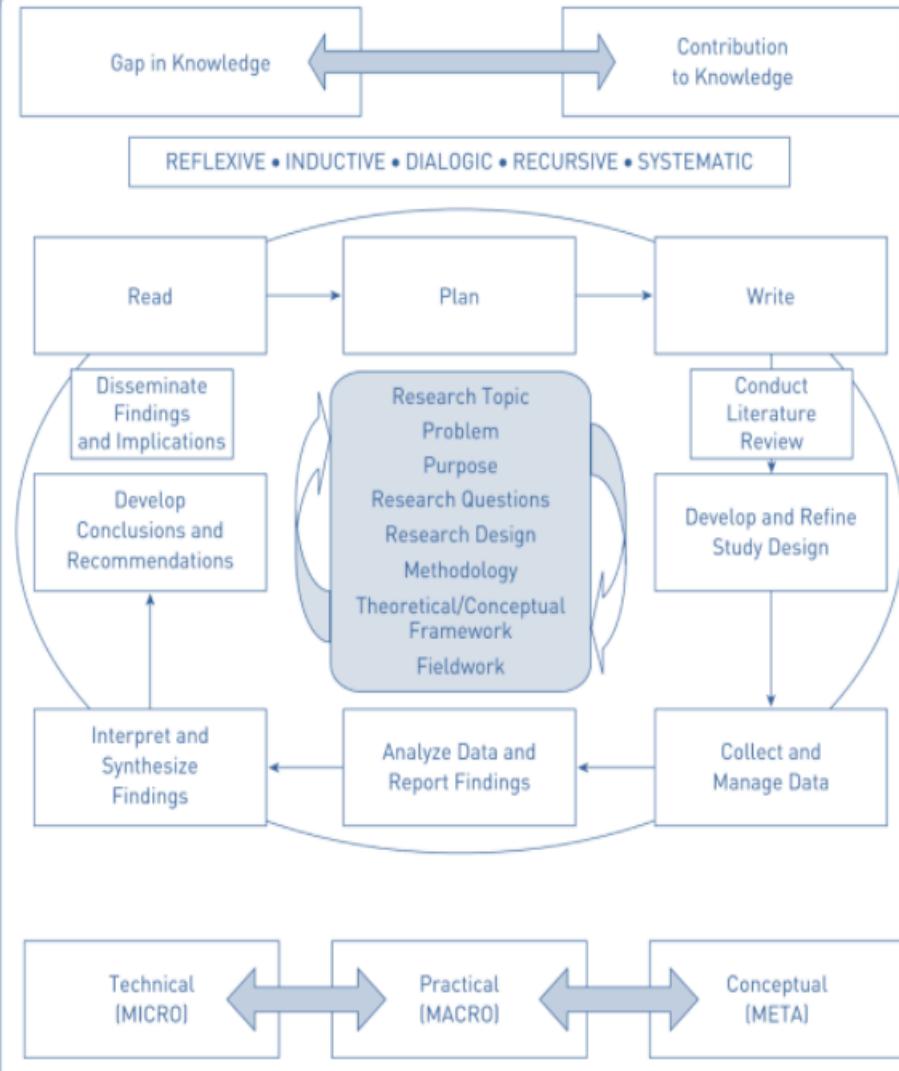
Among the few available archives on the topic of C-suite leadership, scholars Berson et al. (2008) tackled CEO dispositions and how these dispositions relate to organizational outcomes. Their study focused on the relationships between CEO values and organizational culture and how, in turn, these values and the resulting culture impact firm performance. While their research confirms the disposition of its top leaders, its primary focus is on firm performance rather than the state of the culture, which is the primary purpose of this study. The current study aims to probe more deeply into positive leadership behaviors and their impact on creating flourishing organizations.

The dynamics within C-suite leadership teams and the behaviors are of interest specifically to identify how their behavioral impact shapes workplace culture. The influence of the top leadership body is significant, and as such, employees tend to emulate the behaviors they see on display by their top leaders. Therefore, understanding the behavioral characteristics for cultivating a flourishing organizational culture is of primary interest. The study also details those traits that foster toxic workplace cultures for comparison purposes.

Research Design

The aim of this dissertation from a design perspective was to adopt a structure that appropriately conveys the research problem, purpose, selected research questions, choice of site, and research sample (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The diagram presented in Figure 8 visually illustrates the process used to complete this study.

FIGURE I.1 Visualizing the Dissertation Process



Source: This figure first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2010). Understanding qualitative inquiry: Content and process (Part II). Unpublished manuscript.

Source: Adapted from Bloomberg & Volpe (2018)

Figure 8. Dissertation Process Visual

A qualitative methodological approach was selected to examine the research problem and was the best option for addressing the purpose of the study. This method allowed for an inductive approach, utilizing grounded theory tools and processes. Figure 9 captures the process used for developing the Flourishing Organizational Culture Model, introduced in Chapter 5:

<i>Features of the Methodology That Enhance Grounded Theory Development.</i>	
Step ^a	Key Features
Research Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate a well-defined phenomenon of interest and research question(s) (research question[s] framed in “how” terms aimed at surfacing concepts and their inter-relationships)
Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially consult with existing literature, with suspension of judgment about its conclusions to allow discovery of new insights • Give extraordinary voice to informants, who are treated as knowledgeable agents • Preserve flexibility to adjust interview protocol based on informant responses • “Backtrack” to prior informants to ask questions that arise from subsequent interviews
Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perform initial data coding, maintaining the integrity of 1st-order (informant-centric) terms • Develop a comprehensive compendium of 1st-order terms • Organize 1st-order codes into 2nd-order (theory-centric) themes • Distill 2nd-order themes into overarching theoretical dimensions (if appropriate) • Assemble terms, themes, and dimensions into a “data structure” • Formulate dynamic relationships among the 2nd-order concepts in data structure • Transform static data structure into dynamic grounded theory model • Conduct additional consultations with the literature to refine articulation of emergent concepts and relationships
Grounded Theory Articulation	

^aThe Research Design and Data Collection steps are moderate variations on traditional grounded theory approaches. The Data Analysis and Grounded Theory Articulation steps constitute the main distinctive features of the approach.

Source: Adapted from Gioia & Pitre (1990)

Figure 9. Methodology for Grounded Theory Development

This study also incorporated a constructivist and generative approach to allow for the richness of the stories that were shared and the lived experiences of the researcher as a C-level executive. Constructivist grounded theory adopts the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original introduction of the topic. However, constructivists highlight the flexibility of the theory and resist application to any of its mechanical features (Charmaz, 2014).

The constructivist approach was selected because it eliminates expectations that the researcher must remain a neutral observer and value-free expert. A constructivist approach enabled the researcher to opine on her lived experiences while functioning within a C-suite role.

This constructivist approach also means the researcher can examine any pre-existing privileges, experiences, and preconceptions. That is to say, the researcher's experiences and values may shape the analysis and the facts that they can identify (Charmaz, 2014).

The decision to add generative theory was rooted in the desire to remain open to the unique experiences of each respondent. While including a comparative analysis on positive and negative leadership attributes is a tool utilized in this research to support emerging theory formulation, it also allows the process to yield new revelations potentially. Carlsen and Dutton (2011) posited that a generative approach has the potential to produce more enduring, expansive, and transformative consequences concerning 1) the development of ideas, 2) the development of the researcher and their practices and relationships, and 3) the thought-action repertoires of people in the researched organization.

Charmaz (2014) summed up the overall approach to this study in these words: "Grounded theory methods can complement other approaches to qualitative data

analysis, rather than stand in opposition to them” (p. 13). Furthermore, enabling a process for generating or discovering a theory based upon study participants’ expressed views further enriches the potential to contribute more to the existing literature (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Research Questions

The questions asked of respondents in this study sought to elicit responses that would provide insight into how positive C-suite behaviors and attributes foster flourishing organizational culture, which is the study’s primary focus.

Twelve interviews resulted in collecting a vast amount of data from its participants. Five questions were extrapolated from a series of twelve questions asked of participants. As such, the findings center around the following five questions:

1. What originally attracted you to the company?
2. What does culture mean to you?
3. Which C-suite behaviors, in your experience, foster toxic organizations?
4. If you had space in your briefcase for five C-suite positive leadership attributes only, which in your view, are the most critical?
5. Is there a difference between how you think about the culture of the entire organization versus the culture of the C-suite? Please explain.

The goal of asking these questions was to articulate the respondent's understanding of culture, its place within a business organization, its motivation, and their role as C-suite members.

Setting and Participants

According to Israel (2020), there are almost 6,000 publicly traded companies within the United States that trade on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) and the National Association of Securities Dealer Automated Quotation (NASDAQ). Within these 6,000 companies, fewer than 1% have been identified as exemplars of flourishing organizational cultures, according to *Comparably*'s (2021) Best Global Company Culture 2021 list. Most companies fall within the middle of the spectrum, meaning their workplace cultures are deemed neither flourishing nor toxic. The participants selected for this study work at companies with reputations for being great places to work, and each is a highly respected professional within their respective industries. The companies they lead differ across business sectors and vary in size. When interviewed, the respondents' time in the C-suite role ranged from nine months to ten years.

Leaders for these companies expressed the view that while they know more work is needed to reach the top echelon of flourishing cultures (as none of their companies made the "best culture" lists), their view is that their organizational cultures are relatively healthy. After all, they reason, they enjoy business successes such as strong balance sheets and relatively good relationships with their employees, customers, and

board of directors. In conducting an inductive study, an essential criterion for the researcher was to interview leaders who demonstrated a willingness to speak candidly about their views on positive leadership and speak candidly—albeit anonymously—about the state of their own organizational culture.

This study targeted C-suite business executives from a range of public companies and industries, including Fortune 1000 up to and including Fortune 100. The optimal sample size range determined for the study was between ten and fifteen participant leaders. This range was selected to allow for the inclusion of information, where appropriate, from three interviews conducted during a trial to test the validity of the proposed interview questions in preparation for writing the dissertation. When insights from those three interviews are used in this study, it is noted accordingly. The remaining sample size of twelve participants and their responses constitute the bulk of the findings in this dissertation. The rationale for the number of participants selected was to collect data from different companies and C-suite members with varied experiences. This approach yielded research that produced a qualitative study that is valid and trustworthy. Research findings will be added to the existing artifacts on this subject.

As defined by the purpose of the study, the primary requirement for participants was that they currently serve or very recently served as C-suite members embodying substantive roles in a publicly traded company. Each invited participant met that

criterion. The second criterion was that they led companies with great reputations for significant and sustainable results from both a business perspective and a people perspective. The final measure was that they were regarded as good leaders in the eyes of the people that they lead, their peers, and the companies where they work.

Participants were contacted to schedule an interview at their convenience for a projected duration lasting one and one-half hours. Although conducting in-person interviews was preferred, protocol restrictions brought about by a worldwide pandemic lockdown largely prohibited in-person meetings. This mandate left only the option to interview the participants using telephone or video conferencing technology. Interviews, therefore, were conducted exclusively via Zoom video software to simulate in-person interviews as closely as possible. This method proved efficient and effective as it allowed the researcher to observe the participant's body language and demeanor while answering the interview questions, provided a more personalized experience for the participants, and created an opportunity to review the interview as many times as needed during the data analysis. This mode of interviewing was an especially helpful feature during the coding and memo writing processes. A first indication that the interviews would provide meaningful information surfaced when each participant enthusiastically accepted the invitation to contribute. Meetings were scheduled promptly, and this was greatly appreciated given busy schedules.

Instruments

The primary research instrument used for this study was the interview, which consisted of questions developed as part of the overall interview protocol. C-suite members were asked to respond to twelve open-ended questions presented in the same order each time an interview was conducted. The questions covered leadership topics ranging from what motivated them to accept their C-suite role to soliciting their views on the most critical positive behaviors or attributes that C-suite members should possess. Additionally, respondents were asked to define, in their own words, their definition of culture and what they believe constitutes both positive and toxic behaviors from C-suite members that impact the organization. Before commencing the interviews, each participant was encouraged to share their views and experiences openly and candidly, and they were provided assurances that their responses would remain anonymous. The complete interview protocol is available in Appendix A.

The questions were asked to encourage dialog beyond simple “yes” and “no” responses and presented in semi-structured composition. In several cases, participants provided examples to articulate their responses better and, in some cases, responded using storytelling. Each question was designed to elicit responses in support of the primary dissertation research question: How do positive C-suite behaviors and attributes drive flourishing organizational cultures intentionally? As part of the generative process, the participants were assured of confidentiality to encourage them to speak openly and candidly.

Sampling Procedure

Institutional review board (IRB) approval (Appendix B) was granted prior to soliciting participants. Then, desired participants were contacted to explain the dissertation process and share the researcher's area of interest. As a former practitioner with a strong presence in the business community, the invited participants were relatively easy to secure because they were relationship-based. That said, half of the participants were leaders unknown to the researcher, so a snowball sample was used by soliciting colleagues and friends to broker introductions.

Due to the different geographic locations and pandemic protocols, only four of the twelve initial invitations to participate in the study were issued in person. The remaining eight invitations were extended via telephone and email (Appendix E.).

Twelve C-suite executives comprised of CEOs and other C-suite members were interviewed and asked twelve semi-structured, open-ended questions. In addition, former colleagues of the researcher, C-suite members, were invited to participate voluntarily. As mentioned earlier, the snowball sample approach (Rudestam & Newton, 2014) was used in two instances to recruit other C-suite leaders for participation in this study.

Figure 10, shown below, summarizes the participant demographic information. All pertinent respondent information was compiled and stored in an excel file, which served as the working document for the dissertation process.

Participant Demographics						
C-Suite role	Gender	Identifier	#Yrs in Current Role/# Years Within that Company	Company	Industry	Public Company
CEO	Male	Leader 1	8 years/42 years total	Medical Mutual	Insurance	Yes
CEO	Male	Leader 2	1.5 years/16.5 years total	HID parent company is Assa Abloy	Technology	Yes
CTO	Male	Leader 3	3 years/20 years total	RPM International	Paint & Industrial Coatings	Yes
CEO EVP, CM&CO	Male	Leader 4	9 months	Bedrock parent company is Rocket Companies	Real Estate	Yes
CHRO	Female	Leader 5	5 years	Medical Mutual	Insurance	Yes
COO	Male	Leader 6	1 year/35 years total	Kimball International	Furniture Manufacturing	Yes
CEO	Male	Leader 7	4 years/13 years total	HID parent company is Assa Abloy	Technology	Yes
CEO	Female	Leader 8	2.5 years	Kimball International	Furniture Manufacturing	Yes
CEO	Male	Leader 9	13 years/32 years total	RPM International	Paint & Industrial Coatings	Yes
CEO	Male	10 Leader	10 years	Applied Industrial Technologies	Industrial Manufacturing	Yes
CHRO	Male	11 Leader	7 years	Applied Industrial Technologies	Industrial Manufacturing Construction Products	Yes
CEO	Male	12	5 years/38 years total	TopBuild Corporation	Industry	Yes

Figure 10. C-Suite Leader Interview Participant Demographics

Leader participants represented various public companies, including manufacturing, technology, real estate, insurance, and construction products. Seven of the twelve participants were CEOs, and nine of the twelve had operational profit and loss (P&L) responsibilities. The operational P&L experience is noted because it speaks to the responsibility for making business decisions that impact both people and profit. As a former practitioner who had responsibility for various P&L roles where every cent spent impacts the bottom line, and functional roles, where the leader typically has a budget, it is a different kind of pressure when tasked to consider choices where profit over people is favored.

Of the twelve C-suite leaders interviewed, two were female. Of this group, nine were CEOs, including one of the two females. While the limited number of females selected was unintended, it does underscore that only 8.1 percent of the companies on the latest Fortune 500 list are female. This statistic represents 41 female-led companies thus far in 2021 (Connley, 2021). While 2021 numbers represent a historical high, the quest for females to gain more gender parity at the C-suite level continues (Huang et al., 2019). One implication for future study could manifest in understanding how positive C-suite behaviors drive flourishing organizations when its members are predominantly female versus male.

Qualitative Data Procedures

Data collection

Qualitative interviews were conducted to understand better the dimensions and themes associated with positive C-suite leadership behaviors and any relationship between those behaviors and flourishing cultural environments. The selection process sought those C-suite leaders respected in their field of expertise to hear their views on positive leadership and its impact. In considering the variety in business expertise within the respondent pool, the goal was threefold. The first was to understand if the interviews revealed any common themes and dimensions, despite the different nature of leaders' work and roles. The second was to listen keenly for any differences in responses to the interview questions, which were identical for all respondents, that would prompt generative thinking and perhaps give life to potentially new theories. Third, from a constructivist's perch, the researcher sought to leverage a combination

of professional and personal experiences. When appropriate, technical expertise and academic artifacts were included, culled from over twenty-five years spent as a practitioner. These three factors were considered when conducting the interviews and analyzing the data.

Data analysis

The interviews' raw data were first transcribed using a third-party service, Sonix. The duration of each interview ranged from just under thirty minutes to one hour and fourteen minutes. The accuracy rate for the twelve interviews hovered around 91 percent. Since the accuracy rate was less than 100 percent for each interview conducted, it was necessary to play back each interview video and correct any inaccuracies in the transcription process. This step was sometimes painstaking yet necessary very early in the process to ensure the integrity and validity of the interview and, ultimately, the research. Moreover, the interview videos were used as points of reference because they helped humanize and contextualize the study in a manner that transcripts could not.

Coding

Once the transcription was verified, the task of coding began. A software program, MAXQDA, was initially attempted but was quickly abandoned when it failed to produce output connected closely with respondents' spoken words. The early lesson learned was that it is challenging to capture human emotions and storytelling using software. As Charmaz (2014) posited, grounded theory coding generates the bones of the researcher's analysis and shapes the analytic frame from which the research is

built. For this reason, using manual coding became the preferred method of coding in the early stages of analyzing the data.

First-order coding was used to begin the analysis. This process involved reviewing the transcripts, line by line, and assigning descriptive words that resonated most in making sense of the data the respondents shared. Color-coded sticky notes were used to denote codes by question. Figure 11 illustrates an early first attempt at coding.

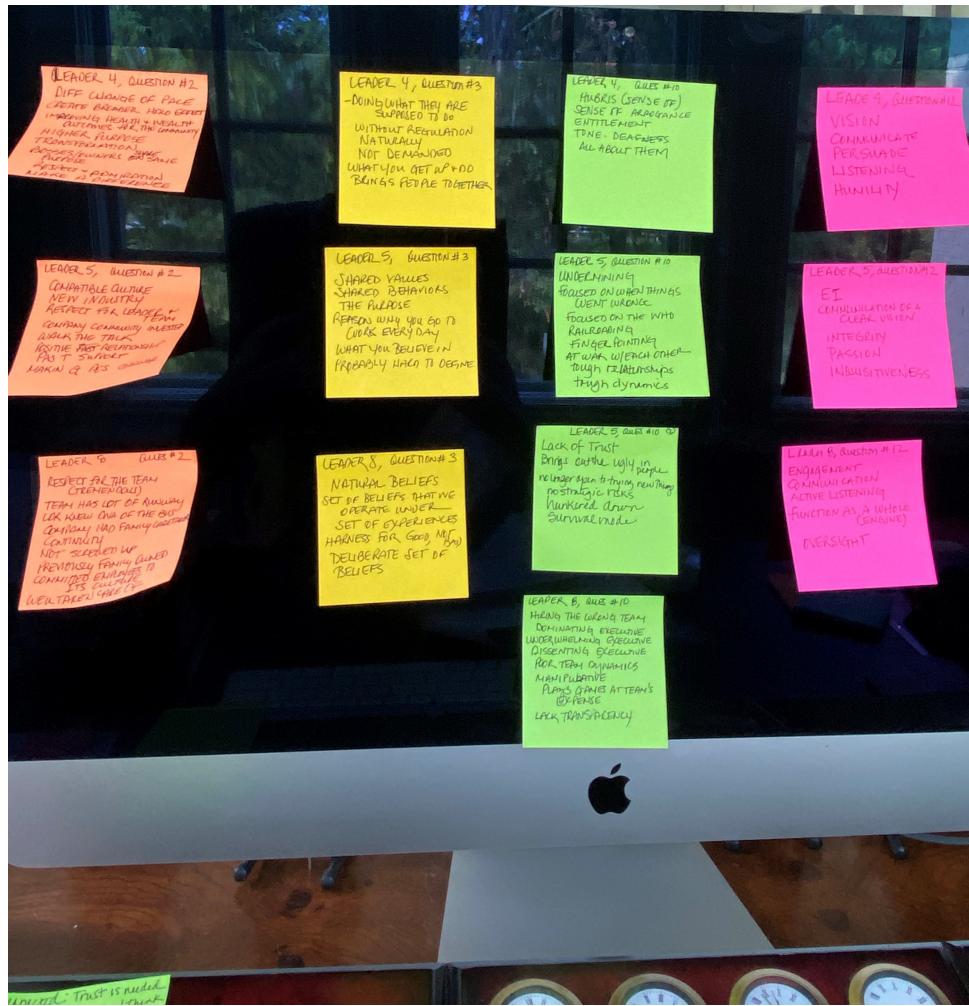


Figure 11. Initial Coding Example

This process became cumbersome, with the output somewhat disjointed; therefore, the decision was made to assign initial codes directly within a copy of the transcript. However, writing the codes onto the printed transcript, while more efficient and orderly than using posted notes, was not the most effective process. Therefore, the process of manually writing codes also was abandoned.

The third and last initial coding method proved the most efficient and provided the degree of connection to the data making for a better flow during the research process. This process involved working directly from the transcripts online and using the highlight feature to mark the initial codes. This method was similar to the second process except that it allowed for cutting and pasting, making the data portable. This online method of highlighting proved very useful in constructing memos (another tool used in the grounded theory approach discussed later in this chapter) and other aspects of the research analysis conducted for this study.

At this stage of the process and during a triangulation session with two executive doctoral cohort colleagues, it became apparent that placing all compiled research in one place made it more efficient to toggle back and forth between the various pieces of data. This convenience helped to ensure accuracy and reduce redundancy.

Therefore, an Excel file was created, which consolidated all dissertation data into a central repository. In addition, information was backed-up using an external drive to safeguard the data further. Figure 12 provides an example of the output from the

preferred initial coding process using Excel. One hundred twenty-eight initial codes were culled from the research data.

What Attracted You to the Company/Role? [Question #2]											
LDR 1	LDR 2	LDR 3	LDR 4	LDR 5	LDR 6	LDR 7	LDR 8	LDR 9	LDR 10	LDR 11	LDR 12
People Type-of-Business Challenge Good-People Values Familiarity Like-Work Big-Job Opportunity Job-Change	Heritage Fundamental Value Basics Interesting Inclusive Difference United-States International	Philanthropy Business Corporate Engagement Attention Curiosity Company-Officer Mindful Saving Profits Discovered Likability Mutuality Trust	Community-Impact Economic-Transformation Improving-Health-Outcomes Growing-Wealth Goal-Alignment Urban-Unrest Social-Injustice Racial-Injustice Second-Career Responsible-Citizen	Career-Change Familiar-Culture Invest Human-Factor Human-Behavior Organizational Change Engaged Collegial Commitment Relationships Values	Career-Longevity Career-Pivot Technology Community Leadership Alignment Robots Automated Jobs Human-Resources	Company-Size Hands-On Involved Team Leadership Respect People Inclusion Completion Investment Resources Smaller-Company	Career-Pivot Runway Energy Inside-View Commitment Respect Longevity Company-Caretaker Culture Potential Greatness Care DNA Change Expertise Grounded Building Purpose Unique Authentic Timing	Seniority Tenure Unique Family-Owned Opportunities Learn Fail Family-Involvement Honest-Mistakes Strategic Learning Entrepreneurial Build International Global Travel Exposure	Familiar Industry Lead-Public-Company Serve-Stakeholders	Prestige Conglomerate Organization Membership Job-Promotion	Company-Size Roles Impact

Figure 12. Initial Coding for Interview Question #2

During this stage of the process, the data was dissected and coded in precise terms, and so began the iterative process of analyzing and synthesizing the respondent interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Further, Charmaz (2014) referred to the researcher's interrogation of the data in a way that takes them apart and examines how they are constituted. Initial coding felt like a fact-finding mission in which the researcher was entrusted to uncover each respondent's truth of their experience as they saw it.

Memo-writing process

Memos (or memoing) serve to assist the researcher in making conceptual leaps from raw data to those abstractions that explain research phenomena in the context in which it is examined. Data exploration is enhanced, continuity of conception and contemplation is enabled, and communication is facilitated through memos (Birks et al., 2008).

Memos were used to help identify common themes, reveal new information, or simply aid the researcher in conducting and analyzing the data. Memos, used as a vehicle for reflection, captured thoughts during the interview or afterward during video playback. The most significant benefit of writing the memos was the informality of the process that allowed the researcher to take stock of what was conveyed by the respondents, both from content and affect perspectives. This process prompted questions, called to mind comparisons of something that may have been heard in another interview, and, in the vein of a constructivist, recalled the researcher's past experiences, which most often resonated with what was being shared and occasionally differed significantly. Memo writing produced analytic notes and began the process of explicating and developing categories (Charmaz, 2014).

Figure 13 depicts an example of memo writing during and after an interview with Leader 2.

Notes LDR 2
[00:00:06:20]
LDR 2 speaks of a career pivot of sorts. Found this to be the case with several of the leaders -- they wanted something more. Interesting because it speaks to human nature more so than a US phenomenon. His reasons initially were for his personal development. He becomes more introspective"And I just realized that there was just so much to do, number one and that I could really make a difference."

[00:06:26:11]
Was struck by LDR 2's view that there are different dimensions of culture and that they are weighted, depending on geographic location. Very insightful point of view. This got me thinking about another possible reason for different company cultures: certain aspects of a given company's culture may have different weights. It may not mean it is lacking intentionally, it may just mean its priorities differ.

[00:07:49:03]
This leader speaks of the characteristics or "dials" leaders have in common who happen to work in the c-suite.
"And I'm not sure that that is what's different or the culture itself."
He describes c-suite leaders as privileged, however, he also acknowledges that they've "probably worked their asses off." Struck me as a bit of a contradiction. He meant privileged in that they were "spoiled" yet he also says they likely worked very hard to get where they are. I was struck by his absolute candor.
"...the more senior management team becomes, there is a different culture." This is also a first for openly admitting there is a difference yet sharing it in a way that does not point to this difference as a bad thing.

[00:15:27:17]
No, on the contrary, I would say the majority is probably not, does not do that. Or not the majority, but a fair portion does not, unfortunately

[00:15:51:13]
"Some people are better carriers of culture." Fascinating response in its pure candidness regarding his c-suite practicing flourishing c-suite behaviors.
I found myself wondering if he viewed it as his responsibility to remedy this condition.
LDRs 2 and 12 named insecurity as the top toxic c-suite member behavior
LDR 2 asked me to speak with him after the call. He asked me for advice, as a former C-Suite member, on how he could successfully tackle problematic behavioral issues within his c-suite.

Figure 13. Memo Writing for Leader 2 Interview

Plans for Presenting Results

Chapters 4 and 5 represent the completed and analyzed participant interview results.

After this project, all data will be transferred to the Dissertation Chairperson, Dr. Gus Gustafson, for secure storage and ultimate disposal after seven years.

Ethical Considerations

There were no potential risks to the study participants, as confirmed by the IRB (Appendix B). All required steps were taken to guard the participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses, including the freedom to discontinue participation in the study at any time and to decline to answer any questions with which they were not comfortable. In addition, each of the twelve participants signed a consent form outlining the promise to protect their confidentiality and anonymity.

Trustworthiness

From the beginning of the research process, the goal was to produce an authentic body of work that makes meaning from the data, makes sense, and is replicable under similar conditions. To ensure the trustworthiness of this work, the researcher adopted the process known as triangulation. Per Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), triangulation addresses the trustworthiness of qualitative studies in various ways by building into the study and research process a systematic cross-checking of information and conclusions through the use of procedures and/or sources to determine where research findings converge or “triangulate,” so they can be interpreted and explained.

Four key forms of triangulation occurred throughout the dissertation process. First, check-ins with interview participants were conducted to clarify the researcher’s understanding of the information shared and clarify any points where questions existed.

Second, memos were constructed to capture any reflections prompted by the interviews, either in the moment or shortly thereafter. Memos were captured during and after each interview, even when multiple interviews were conducted on the same day. This discipline was necessary to fully digest and appreciate each leader’s viewpoints during these periods of reflection, creativity, and the quest for deeper understanding peaked.

Third, at least two of the interview participants appeared guarded in some of their responses, which made for less rich information when it came to fully answering a particular question. The researcher candidly expressed this observation in the respective memo. This observation is also addressed in the study's limitations as a precaution for others embarking on similar future studies.

Fourth, multiple peer discussions with two colleagues from the researcher's doctoral cohort, with oversight by the dissertation chairperson, were conducted to test each other's research process and assumptions. As previously mentioned, all research was managed within an Excel notebook file with multiple tabs denoting the various steps and portions of the research process. Appendix C represents the first tab of the Excel notebook and details how the research and its various components were organized. Finally, for the peer reviewers outside the researcher's academic realm, a triangulation form was constructed and shared via video conference prior to the triangulation process (Appendix D).

Sessions involved walking through first and second-order codes and descriptions, aggregate dimensions, and sub-question selection in support of the research question, as well as the review of three transcripts per colleague. The transcript review and the coding logic for each was a beneficial exercise in 1) understanding and, in some cases, challenging each other's rationale for choices made, and 2) in suggesting insights previously not considered by the other to consider and/or include.

Triangulation also occurred in various stages of the research with the researcher's dissertation chair and, separately, with dissertation committee members. In some instances, peer groups included members from the public boards on which the researcher serves and as friends and other former colleagues who also manage at senior levels within their respective organizations. During this vetting of the research problem, interestingly, there came the realization that the topic of C-suite behavior is of interest to many and garners differing viewpoints.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to document the selected research methodology used to analyze positive C-suite leader behaviors and attributes and how they drive flourishing work cultures. At its center are the expressed views of C-suite executives who opine how positive C-suite behaviors foster flourishing organizational culture. They use their vantage points as C-suite members to draw readers into the thinking of an elite group of business leaders who have reached the pinnacles of their careers. This chapter detailed the approach, design, tools, data collection, data analysis methods, and rationale for undertaking this research. Additionally, ethical assurances and research trustworthiness were discussed.

It has been noted that social distancing mandates restricted the preferred traditional face-to-face investigations for qualitative research of this kind. The best, and surprisingly very efficient alternative, was to conduct all investigations via video

conferencing technology. This pivot allowed for a better data collection process because the entire interview was always available and ultimately allowed for a very efficient study design.

Chapter 4 summarizes the findings from this study that will meaningfully add incremental knowledge to the existing body of literature within the academic community. The hope is that the practitioner sector will find the information contained within this study useful in the hiring, development, and ongoing assessment of C-suite executives serving within publicly traded companies.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents perspectives on what constitutes positive C-suite leadership behavior through the lens of C-suite members. The emergent C-suite critical positive behaviors model for driving a flourishing culture described in this chapter was developed solely as a result of an inductive inquiry based on responses from the C-suite study participants. (The model itself will be fleshed out further in Chapter 5.)

Qualitative Data Analysis

This section details the findings culled from twelve semi-structured interviews from a C-suite member population working in various companies across multiple industries. In this chapter, key themes are defined, discussed, and summarized. Afterward, relationships between the themes are discussed.

As described in Chapter 3, this study utilized the Gioia Model (Gioia et al., 2013) to make meaning from the interview data collected. The beginning of the analysis consists of creating the first-order codes, followed by developing the second-order codes, which ultimately lead to the development of aggregate dimensions, discussed further here. This process enabled the qualitative researcher to apply a systematic conceptual and analytic discipline that led to credible and valuable interpretations of the data. Using the Gioia method also helps reassure readers that stated conclusions are plausible and defensible (Gioia et al., 2013) (Appendix F).

Key themes

Five key themes, or aggregate dimensions in Gioia Model jargon (Gioia et al., 2013), are explained in this chapter through the lens of C-suite members. Four themes center around the positive C-suite behaviors and attributes that are necessary for driving flourishing organizational cultures:

1. C-suite leaders seek a higher purpose in their roles
2. Leader definition of culture is contextual.
3. C-suite leaders desire certain positive behaviors and attributes for C-suite membership.
4. C-suite leaders have two schools of thought regarding organizational culture.
5. C-suite leaders' behavioral barriers to C-suite effectiveness.

Each of these themes and their corresponding findings is discussed next.

Theme 1: C-suite leaders seek a higher purpose in their roles

The data for the first theme, “C-suite leaders seek a higher purpose in their roles,” suggests that C-suite leaders accept their positions with the intent of making a difference and performing meaningful work. Using the Gioia Method open coding process, 12 first-order concepts were selected after eliminating code redundancy from an initial 64 first-order descriptive codes. Three second-order themes were identified using the axial coding process, providing the reader with the C-suite leader impetus for accepting their role. The key second-order themes are (a) trusted relationships, (b) realize career aspirations, and (c) perform meaningful work. Figure 14 represents the data structure, and connectivity between first-order codes and second-order themes in

connection with the aggregate theme of “C-suite leaders seek a higher purpose in their roles.”

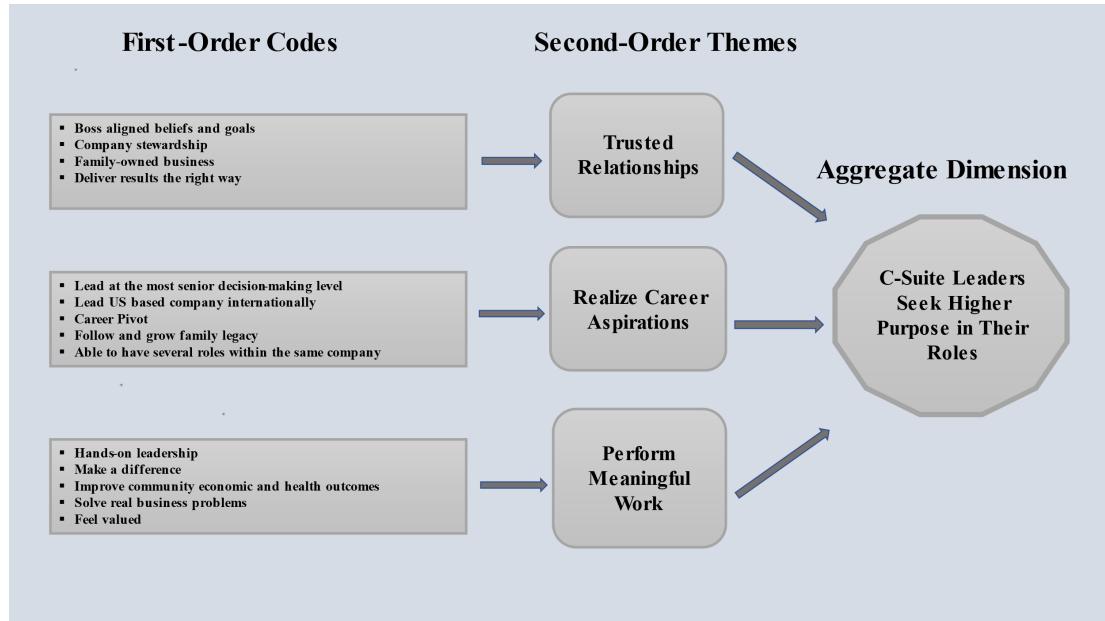


Figure 14. C-Suite Leaders Seek Higher Purpose in Their Roles

Trusted relationships

The analysis suggests that C-suite members accept their roles for a higher purpose, which was consistent across all interviews. Trusted relationships, the first second-order theme, emerged as a critical factor in C-suite members' decisions to accept their roles. For those leaders who assumed their C-suite role as new employees to their companies, having trusted relationships was a primary factor in their decision to make a job change. Two excerpts speak to the importance of trusted relationships in explaining C-suite leaders' impetus for accepting their roles. Leader #5 shared the following:

I knew (name omitted to preserve anonymity) very well and some of his executive leaders. And honestly, just being in the community, I was very impressed with (company name omitted to preserve anonymity). I thought from afar their culture seemed compatible to the culture I had grown up in. They were invested in the community. They were, you know, they put their money where their mouths were. They were always front and center and in every big initiative and anything meaningful both to me and to my previous company. And I just thought, you know, if I'm going to make a change, I'm going to focus on making a change with the people I want to change with, as opposed to necessarily the industry or the act or the organization.

Further to the theme of trusted relationships, Leader #4 explained the following:

I guess the most pivotal conversation was the conversation I had with (names omitted, leader was speaking with the company owners), and we had a conversation, and it wasn't about building buildings, it wasn't about development. It was about economic transformation for all of Detroit and all of Cleveland from our vantage point. And I expressed what I have just said that I think that if I were to do it again, I'd be talking about improving health outcomes and growing wealth. And they were right in sync with that. And it wasn't about you got to go figure out how to build these things and return 15 percent ROI within the next five years. It was a great conversation. And because of that, I said, you know what? Based on the things I've been saying a month ago about how I, you know, I need to get back in the ring, so to speak.

As evidenced by these two examples, the reasons for each may differ slightly.

However, the underlying theme is the strong connection with the people and not necessarily the institutions they had contemplated working within a C-suite member capacity. A connection with the people is also true for the remaining ten interviews. Simply put, they trusted the relationships.

One leader spoke of having joined the company 42 years ago because of how the company conducted business and treated its people as a customer. Once a member of

the C-suite, the legacy of these trusted relationships is what the leader said instilled trust that the desired business results were always achieved in the right way. The data for each interview suggests that a factor in accepting their roles was that they felt there was an alignment of goals and relationships of trust. As one leader indicated when explaining the rationale for deciding to join her organization: “I was on the cusp of retiring and kind of one of those moments in your career that you get to make a choice” (Leader #8).

While the data suggests the importance of enjoying trusted relationships when considering their roles, C-suite member interviewees also felt it was essential to cultivate these relationships. This data correlates to their expressed views on positive C-suite behaviors and attributes. This sentiment is best captured in statements made by two C-suite members who participated in a pre-dissertation interview exercise. An early interviewee’s sage advice for all C-suite members was brief: “Just don’t be a jerk” (Leader #1).

Another early interviewee strongly felt that C-suite leaders must comport themselves consistently so that the organization is afforded a measure of stability. He stated, somewhat humorously, that C-suite leaders must not show up each day “like a box of chocolates” (Leader #2). Leader #12, who was interviewed nine months later for this study, said nearly the same thing:

People have to view you as somebody who will be fair, as fair as you can be, who will view, who will know what to expect from you.

You're not going to be one person one day and somebody else the next day.

Realize career aspirations

Data from the next second-order theme made evident that while all C-suite respondents expressed the desire to realize their career aspirations, those aspirations looked different for each of them. Realizing career aspirations manifested itself in the data in several ways. For example, a leader expressed aspiring to lead at the most senior level and reach the highest level within his department. Another leader indicated the opportunity to run a publicly traded company with operations based internationally as the impetus for joining their companies. Another respondent said the following:

The reason I've stayed is I love our entrepreneurial culture. I love the opportunities for me to build what was a U.S. company into a more international, and hopefully, more global business is personally very exciting in terms of traveling the world for business and getting exposed to other cultures and other parts of the world. (Leader #9)

This same interviewee, Leader #9, had grown up in his family's business and aspired to lead the company and continue to grow as his predecessor, his father, had. This leader indicated that the grooming process and his aspirations for a leadership role began at a young age.

Perform meaningful work

Although the specific reasons for accepting their C-suite roles varied, data indicate a consistent theme in their expressed desire to perform meaningful work. Interviewed leaders often expressed having come to a point where they had the luxury of

performing work that they deemed meaningful while also indicating this was not always the case. Data and a recurring theme signaled that personally making a difference was of the utmost importance for them. As an executive practitioner, this researcher notes that a common complaint in working within large organizations is the tendency to feel that the organization is too large to make a personal impact. This conclusion—that being one among many within an environment can feel impersonal—is not uncommon. Leader #7 spoke of the difference he felt when moving from a large company to one that is smaller: “The fact that I had the ability to actually watch and be hands-on and watch my ideas actually come to fruition. It’s so much more difficult in a big company to see that.

For other leaders, accepting their roles within the C-suite represented an opportunity to fulfill a mission that felt deeply personal. The revelation revealed in one interview was of particular interest because it showed the leader’s thoughtfulness, vulnerability, and complete openness. At one point during the interview, Leader #4 said the following regarding his decision to come out of a self-imposed retirement shortly following the social unrest that reached fever-pitch after the George Floyd and Brionna Taylor killings:

And so, it wasn’t a pleasant, let’s say, retirement process. So, I decided to use my efforts to perhaps, see if I could... If looking back, I said to myself, what would I have done differently? What should I have done differently? Because regardless of any contentment I may have from my professional career, I was a part of creating some of this urban unrest because I was in the urban development world. That’s what I was doing, creating places and spaces for people to live and work and thrive. Clearly, not too well. So, I started thinking back when I started

to begin to think about policies that I might change if I were in, if I had the ability to do so.

C-suite roles carry much responsibility, and often the margin for error is slim given the gravity of these executives' decisions. The pressure to perform flawlessly can be crushing, yet imperfect humans occupy these roles when all is said and done. One leader opined that C-suite leaders "don't have to be a perfect person. You've just got to be a decent person, I think" (Leader #1).

Theme 2: Leader definition of culture is contextual

As shared in the Literature Review, culture means different things to different people. This view was evident in leaders' definitions of culture as contextual dimension. The responses were thoughtful and diverse and ranged from the simplest explanation of culture as "what we get up and do every day" (Leader #4) to more expansive definitions.

Figure 15 captures and represents the data structure illustrating that leaders' definitions of culture are contextual and generate discussion on its connection between first-order codes and second-order themes. Initial first-order codes totaling 135 were reviewed, scrutinized for redundancies, and reduced. Subsequently, using selective coding, 15 first-order codes were created. The dimensional theme "Leader definition of culture is contextual" is supported by three second-order themes (a) culture is personal, (b) culture is a method for getting things done, and (c) culture is a set of behaviors.

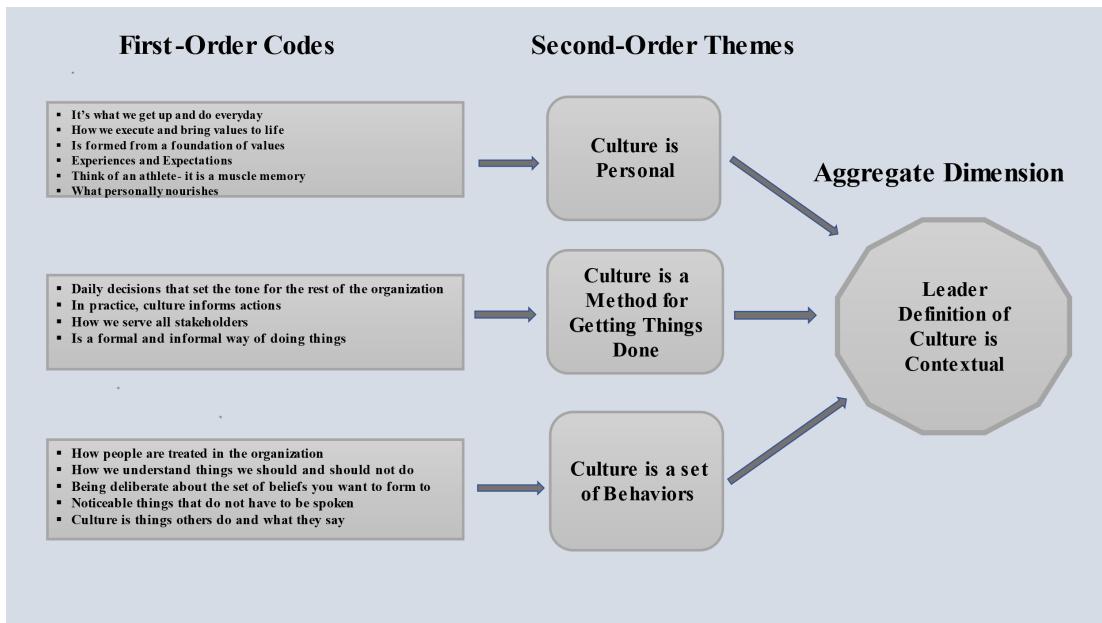


Figure 15. Leader Definition of Culture is Contextual

Culture is personal

Throughout the interview process, what continually surfaced was the individuality inherent in each respondent's articulation of the meaning of culture. The data suggest that each person experiences culture differently, and for this reason, culture is personal. Accordingly, one leader expressed that culture “is what personally nourishes us” (Leader #5). Another leader likened culture to athleticism when he said, “Think of an athlete; it is muscle memory” (Leader #9).

Also implicitly suggested in the data was the view that values serve as the foundation for culture. When applied to the workplace and their roles as C-suite members, interview participants emphasized the importance of how they needed to execute to bring those best values and, thus, their organizations to life.

The importance of C-suite leaders understanding of their company's organizational culture and their roles as influencers in shaping flourishing environments based upon their designation, and, therefore, responsibility as top leadership, appeared in the data as one leader offered this definition of culture:

Culture is the way an organization feels. Or the way an organization behaves. The kinds of things that are noticeable and don't have to be spoken. The vibe, you know. The sense of being, the sense of place, the, you know, the way you feel about the environment all of those really speak to culture because it's the way things are done. And, it's passed along in a way that doesn't necessarily come with a manual, meaning that people behave a certain way based on the culture, which could oftentimes be things they've seen other people do or things they've heard other people say. (Leader #3)

Culture is a method for getting things done

The data suggests that leaders view culture as personal, yet data also indicates that culture is present and occupies a central role within the business. Further, all interviewees acknowledged that culture is ever-present and a part of their daily operating rhythms. Finally, as opined by one leader, culture informs actions (Leader #10). Although expressed by leaders in various ways, this sentiment was reflected across the interviews. For example, culture as a method for getting things done is supported in this instance via a focus purely on the cooperative spirit of an engaged set of people within the organization:

And what it means to me is having people alive and having people on board; people have a voice and the ability to help really actually make a substantial change. But you have guardrails that help you govern your business. That's what culture is for us. (Leader #7)

The data points to culture as the governing body for what should and should not be done. Culture, according to another, is the “daily decisions that set the tone for the rest of the organization” (Leader #11). Finally, one leader equated culture as the mechanism for the interaction between the organization and its stakeholders by stating that culture is “how we serve all stakeholders” (Leader #10).

Culture is a set of behaviors

Culture and behavior garnered a great deal of discussion by leaders during the interview process. Invariably, when discussing culture, each articulated definition includes some mention of behavior. However, data also suggest another aspect of workplace behavior related to culture—it highlights things that, although noticeable, do not require the spoken word; instead, there is inherent understanding.

Several leaders believed their roles as C-suite members carried a requirement to ensure their actions mirrored what they said, which usually were the espoused required behaviors and values of the company. One leader, who had had the vantage point of sitting on the organization’s board of directors before becoming its CEO, said the following regarding behaviors and culture:

And the interesting thing about culture is, I always say, to harness it for good and not evil. You know, really understanding those beliefs and not being afraid to think about which part of those beliefs you want to push, you know, and to make the business successful in the future and getting the organization OK with that. That’s such a part of, such an important part of leading during change is being very deliberate about the set of beliefs that you believe the organization has and being very deliberate about where you want to form to and what you want to work on together. (Leader #8)

Interviews made it clear that culture is indeed contextual as no two definitions were identical. However, the interview process also revealed similar thinking, which resulted in the grouping of second-order themes.

Theme 3: C-suite leaders desire certain positive behaviors and attributes for C-suite membership

The fourth key theme in the study of how positive leadership behaviors drive flourishing organizational cultures is C-suite leaders desire certain positive behaviors and attributes for C-suite membership. This theme grew from a question that asked leaders to select the five most critical positive behaviors or characteristics they deem necessary for all members of the C-suite to possess. Open coding identified 116 initial codes, and the researcher reduced this number to 17 first-order codes. The data also produced three second-order themes: (a) C-suite price-of-entry behaviors; (b) C-suite competencies; and (c) tone at the top. Figure 16 represents the data depiction for C-suite members for theme number four:

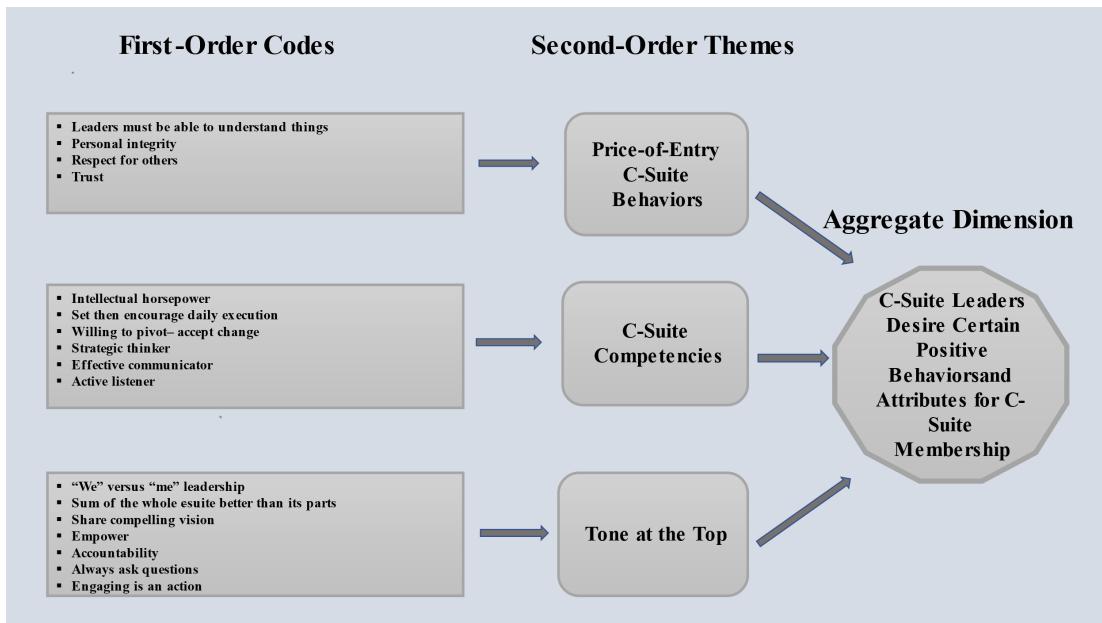


Figure 16. C-Suite Leaders Desire Certain Positive Behaviors and Attributes for C-Suite Membership

The data suggest that naming just five positive behaviors or attributes was a tall order and not possible for some leaders. As one leader put it, “Well, first of all, that’s like asking which one of your kids would you save. That’s a really hard thing” (Leader #1). Several leaders responded by either attempting to combine two behaviors or attributes to meet the five-descriptor limit or announcing their intention to “cheat a little bit” by naming behaviors and attributes beyond the limit. Leaders felt strongly that some behavioral traits or attributes are a given and thus representative of baseline expectations or price of entry when a leader enters into C-suite membership. Still, the data suggest that leaders included trust and integrity if held to naming their five must-have positive behaviors and attributes.

C-suite price of entry behaviors

The following quotation captures the attempt to combine attributes by one leader: “I put integrity and respect as one; would that be okay?” (Leader #11). Integrity, respect, and trust repeatedly surfaced when leaders were asked to provide what they deemed the most positive peer behaviors: “I’ll start with two that are critical but don’t; I’m not going to let me count towards my five. I’ll say to carry the bag, to be on the team, you have to have integrity and respect” (Leader #10).

Business acumen, or the ability to understand things, also is reflected in the data as attributes leaders felt should accompany new C-suite members into their senior leadership roles:

The great thing is, as you and I are talking, we’ve never used the words *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion*. Because to me, if you have the right people around who understand context and have perspective, it comes with that. (Leader #4)

Intellectual horsepower surfaced as a necessary competency and is a data point highlighted by interviewees as a requisite for assuming C-suite roles. It is referenced at this juncture in the study because it was most prominently linked in the data to C-suite “must-have” competencies. Emphasis on understanding the requirements of the C-suite role and one’s business was shared, as expressed by this leader’s view: “One is intellectual horsepower and competence. I think, I mean, the business world’s competitive; there’s just no getting around it. So, you as a leader, you have to have that horsepower in your head” (Leader #12).

In the above statement, the leader views meeting competitive business challenges as a critical competence and a must-have positive attribute for C-suite leadership.

C-suite competencies

When discussing the critical positive C-suite behaviors, one leader spoke of the importance of engagement in the sense of active leadership. The leader sought to distinguish engagement, which is a form of active leadership, from mere oversight, which is passive and the preferred state of too many leaders. This sentiment is expressed in the following: “I do think that engagement is an action. I think of those as in contradiction to each other, engagement, and oversight” (Leader #8).

The data also point to the importance leaders placed on the critical need for C-suite leaders to engage in the practice of listening. Leaders emphasized that active listening is purposeful and consumes their energy when done correctly. Several quotations are excerpted below as leaders weighed in:

- “Listening is so much more important than talking as a leader” (Leader #4).
- “I have an active listening mode, and people are always like, do you have a question? I’m like, no, I’m just listening! And, you know, it’s, it takes energy to do that. Like, it’s very purposeful” (Leader #8).
- “I would say, listening. There is so much that can be learned from others. The old adage, God gave us two ears and one mouth, you know?” (Leader #3).

The data suggest that once leaders actively listen for increased understanding of the members within their organizations, creating flourishing cultures is enhanced by asking questions. Inquisitiveness, they say, is not only indicative of demonstrating interest but asking why or thinking things through also cultivates a learning organization. One leader shared the following perspective: “This is one of my favorites: I call it intellectual curiosity. So, it’s somebody who, you know, whether they’re verbalizing the question or whether they’re just thinking through things, like always asking the question. Why?” (Leader #12).

A final data point to share as part of this study is that leaders viewed a willingness to accept change and pivot as the situation warrants as a critical positive behavioral characteristic. In addition, one leader made a connection between a C-suite leader having this skill and an added capacity for innovation: “I think innovation, or attitude, a positive attitude to change, is definitely a leadership capability” (Leader #2).

Tone at the top

The data suggests that each interviewee accepted and readily understood that they bear the ultimate responsibility for setting the right tone in their roles as C-suite members. Leaders strongly expressed that their stewardship mandates empowering the people within their organizations. One leader opines below on how C-suite leaders should think about leadership: “Why don’t we say ‘we’ versus ‘me’ leadership? So, you know, a leadership focus that is not focused on the individual, it’s not about ‘me.’ It’s about ‘we’” (Leader #6).

The same leader went on to add the following about the extent to which they believe the C-suite can accomplish its business goals and objectives: “Equipping and empowering others to make whatever true we want to make true because the C-suite cannot make it all happen. And when they don’t know what to do, they will do what they can” (Leader #6).

Another leader shared this same sentiment in the interview:

Yeah, I would say, one, that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. So, the actual C-suite itself. Like, you could have one great CFO, but every, you know, everybody else, they didn’t work together. Getting that C-suite to operate, it’s the engine of the organization. I think there is, somehow, that C-suite has to be able to manage this kind of heart. I call it heart and mind. So, it’s got to be able to have a heart and exhibit that heart comfortably, but also have a kind of the grit of the business decisions and running of the business at the exact same time. (Leader #8)

Data in this study suggest the criticality of another C-suite leader competency: vision.

For example, Leaders #6 and #5, respectively, had this to say:

- “Vision, strategic thinking, opportunities, and threats. What’s next? Got to be thinking there” (Leader #6).
- “Communication of a clear vision. So, I was going to have those separate. But since I’m kind of cheating a little bit. So, I think that’s extraordinarily important” (Leader #5).

Theme 4: C-suite leaders have two schools of thought regarding organizational culture

The researcher decided to include a question that asked respondents if they believed there is a difference between how they think about the entire organization's culture versus the culture of the C-suite and, if so, to explain how. This idea was because, during the pre-dissertation interview, a leader had mentioned the difficulty an organization experiences when sub-cultures are operating simultaneously. When the researcher posed this question to leaders for this study, the answers were not unanimous for one position. Instead, leaders offered rationales supporting the necessities of having one culture and then pivoted to why sub-cultures are sometimes necessary as well.

Of the five critical themes detailed in this study, this is the only theme representing responses divided into two distinct camps. The data present a compelling case for each and underscore the complications leaders face when balancing the business of their businesses and the people who make up those businesses. After sifting through the data for any redundancies, the researcher counted 155 initial first-order codes and synthesized them into 12 first-order codes. Next, the two second-order themes were culled from the data and organized: (a) one organizational culture and (b) organizational sub-cultures. Figure 17 illustrates the data associated with C-suite leaders having two schools of thought regarding organizational culture.

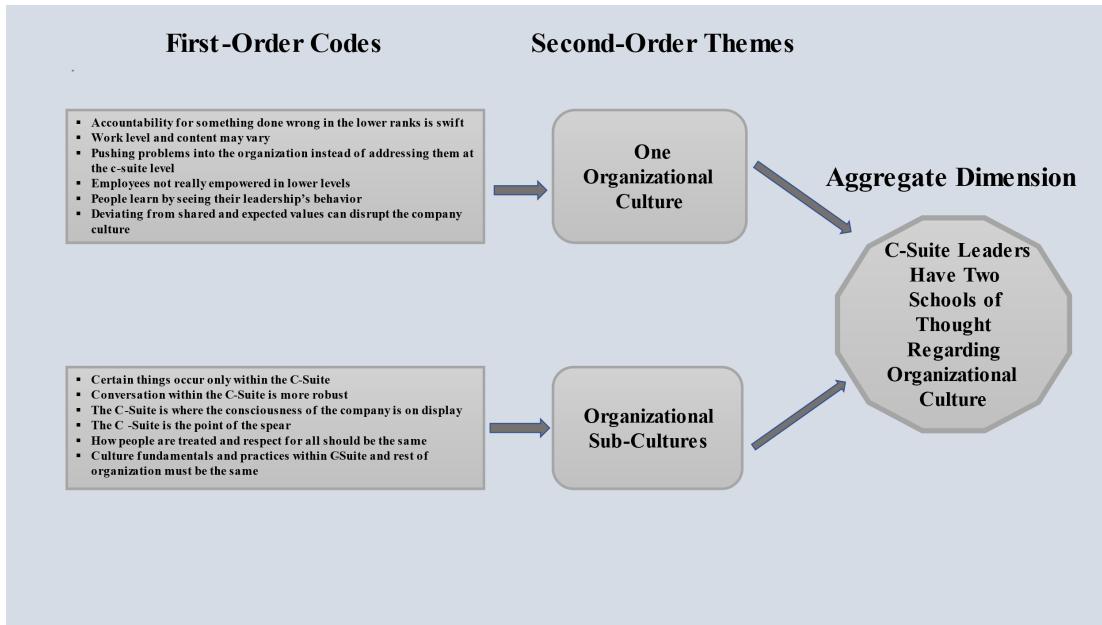


Figure 17. C-Suite Leaders Have Two Schools of Thought Regarding Organizational Culture

One organizational culture

The data in this study show that C-suite leaders believe fostering an organization where there are not two sets of books, so to speak, is critical for an engaged workforce and their businesses overall. Uppermost on many of their minds was quelling any notion that C-suite leaders are exceptional or somehow exempt from the rules within the organization, even at its more junior levels. As Leader #1 put it, “Yeah, I mean, obviously, I think the answer would be no, in that you expect both to have the rules that apply to the employees overall certainly have to apply to the C-suite folks.” This same leader, however, was also quick to add, “But I would add that, yes, in some way I view the culture of the C-suite just a little different, and because they’ve got the added, I don’t want to call it pressure, but the employees are watching what the leaders do.”

Each leader who agreed that only one culture within an organization is best was careful to note that it is incumbent on the top leadership to ensure they embody the correct behaviors. Further, that single culture had to be one where the C-suite's demonstrated behaviors set the tone for the rest of the organization in the right way. This tone-setting means that all employees, C-suite included, play by the same rules and are accountable.

There is a point to make regarding leader proponents for one organizational culture. Data suggest that for these leaders, the C-suite represents the “tip of the spear,” the place where the “full consciousness of the company is on display” (Leader #11). Therefore, the expressed view is an almost parental responsibility for shaping the organizational culture through the demonstration and espousal of that organization’s positive behaviors, desired cultural values, rules, and responsibilities.

One leader spoke days before C-suite membership and the effect those experiences had on his thinking regarding the C-suite culture and the culture for the rest of the organization:

I've never forgotten what it was like to be someone who maybe didn't have the voice or the loudest voice or the most prominent, dominant voice in the organization, and I think that's something that has always stuck with me, and I've always tried to bring the voice of everyone in the organization to the C-suite. So, to me, they're the same. They're not, there is no difference between the two. (Leader #7)

The final data point regarding interviewee leader rationale for one culture is as follows:

To me, I think there can be no difference. That there cannot be two sets of rules or two sets of standards, maybe the expectations and what we're working on may vary at levels in the organization, but the fundamental of culture and acceptable practices and acceptable behaviors, I think that runs throughout. And I think it's important as leaders that they set the right tone. Lead by example, the right tone at the top. (Leader #10)

Organizational sub-cultures

The explanations are seemingly simple for those who felt organizational sub-cultures are fine and represent a practical aspect of a business. Leader #12 shared the following thoughts when asked to provide a viewpoint:

I think so. I mean, realistically, there are certain activities that happen at the top of the house with the C-suite that don't happen all the way through the organization. That's just a practical matter. There's other, are different levels of communication that happen throughout. I think the way a C-suite operates, is probably a little bit different. I think the communication has to be more robust. (Leader #12)

Based on the researcher's practitioner experience working at three large companies that are well over 100 years old, iconic, and rooted in set operating patterns, a hierarchical structure intentionally views its C-suite as members of an elite club. This cultural entrenchment has survived for decades and thrives today.

The data captured the emphasis by leaders that the existence of sub-cultures is not rooted in separatism for the sake of establishing C-suite elitism. Instead, the presence of sub-cultures is sometimes the best logical construct within a business. For

example, at least two leaders provided the example of running companies that act as holding companies. In these cases, the companies are purchased, and there is no desire to create fully integrated cultures. In short, since they are not truly part of any parent organization per se, these companies are left to their own devices culture-wise. Thus, they primarily operate as they did before their acquisition.

Theme 5: C-suite leaders' behavioral barriers to C-suite effectiveness

When culling data for this key theme, the interviewees expressed a great deal of energy on the topic of leader toxicity. However, posing the original question, “Which C-suite behaviors make an organization’s culture toxic?” required the C-suite interviewees to step away from responding to largely positive questions. As a result, there was a noticeable shift in the interview discussion. To a fault, the conversations turned more serious. Once all the responses were recorded and the open coding process underway, 108 initial codes emerged in the data. These were reduced using the method previously referenced to produce 19 final first-order codes. Next, four second-order themes were derived using the axial coding process and identifying C-suite behavioral barriers to C-suite effectiveness: (a) low moral quotient; (b) low emotional intelligence; (c) destructive leadership; and (d) insecurity. Figure 18 depicts the coding structure for C-suite behavioral barriers to C-suite effectiveness.

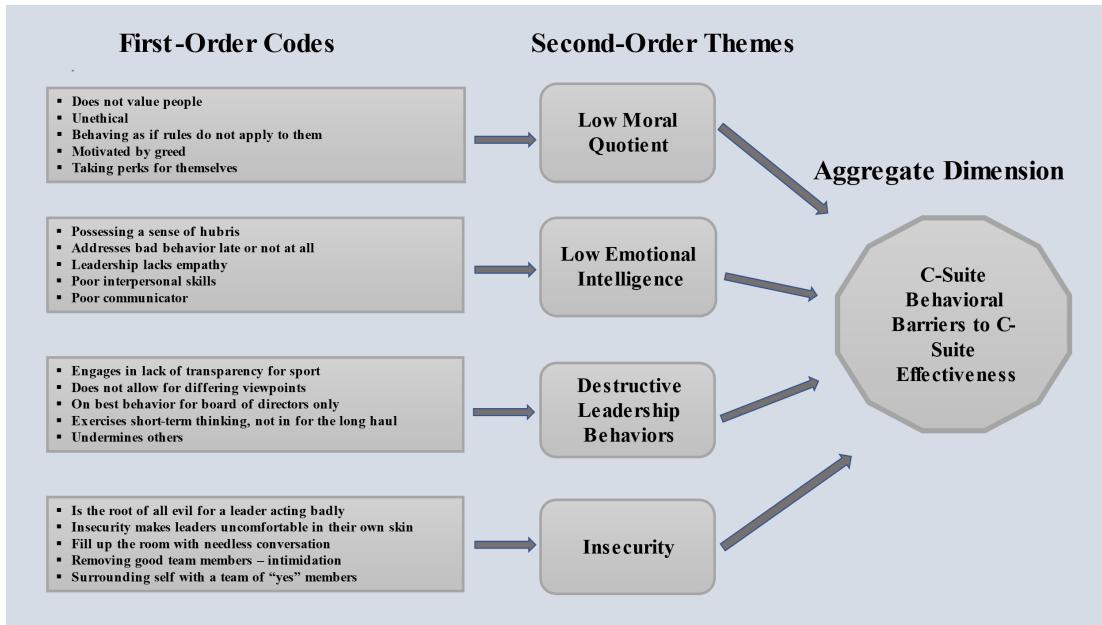


Figure 18. C-Suite Behavioral Barriers to C-Suite Effectiveness

Low moral quotient

By far, leaders felt values-based leadership demonstrating caring and value for people was possibly the number one contributor to toxic organizational cultures if it were missing. After all, they reasoned, if the C-suite demonstrated a lack of empathy and caring, the sentiment would permeate the organization, and its members would behave accordingly. As Leader #7 explains, this behavior serves to set the tone for the kind of culture an organization will have:

I think most people here know Machiavelli. I think people are inherently good, right? We have others who believe people are inherently bad. So, I think that your stance there then helps you develop how you see the culture. But I tell you what; you've heard the old adage, culture eats strategy.

C-suite member leadership actions motivated by greed related to money, power, and rewards were highlighted and reflected in the data as a high derailer for C-suite

member effectiveness. Below are quotations excerpted from several leaders on the subject:

- “Nothing would create a toxic environment more than showing somebody what you just said is we value the money more than the respect and the behavior” (Leader #1).
- “So, I think the simple answers are things like pride and money or power, pride, money” (Leader #9).
- “And right up there with *bias*, maybe equally bad would be the word *greed*” (Leader #3).

The interviewees agreed that the C-suite leader role carries a great deal of responsibility, as reflected in their salaries. They also acknowledged the availability of perks that come with the position. However, leaders unanimously felt C-suite leaders needed to understand the poor optics such behavior generates. The leaders felt the perception of elitism and imbalance in how employees are rewarded or valued could foster resentment and organizational toxicity.

The data also suggest that the interviewee leaders regard behaving as if the rules do not apply to them regarding ethics, conduct, or simply the organization’s general operating procedures as a considerable contributor to organizational culture toxicity. For example, one leader opined the following:

Number one, when the C-suite folks think and act like the rules don't apply to them. Yeah, we have rules, but that's not for me. I mean, I can do whatever I want, and that carries into when they take all the perks for themselves. And all those things are the things that employees see, and they hear, and it frustrates them. (Leader #1)

Low emotional intelligence

The leaders expressed strong views on the necessity for C-suite members to practice self-awareness. Practicing self-awareness was emphasized because each acknowledged that leaders, like anyone else, are imperfect, and this imperfection means mistakes will occur. The data indicate that arrogance and its first cousin, leadership lacking empathy, were flagged as vital enablers for fostering toxic organizations. Leader #4 offered a viewpoint in the following quotation:

Hubris, to me, is a sense of arrogance, entitlement, tone-deafness, and sometimes it's so they don't even realize it, you know. It's personality-driven as opposed to organizational culture driving. Nothing worse than watching an employee be trapped because you don't get the best of them. You get the minimum. Just to feed the ego of the C-suite, and that is the most toxic behavior I can even think of.

Leaders unanimously agreed that C-suite leaders that were slow or failed to address bad behavior fostered organizational toxicity. Worse, they shared, is when lower-level employees are consistently held accountable for their actions. This disparity created or deepened organizational trust in leadership, as explained by one leader: "You know, obviously, when the C-suite is supporting or tolerating discriminatory non-inclusive actions. It comes down to a big, broad issue of just not having a respect for all your employees" (Leader #1).

On the disparity that sometimes exists between C-suite accountability as compared to the rest of the organization, Leader #7 shared the following:

There are so many layers between us and the lower level in the org in any organization that it's easy to blame. It's easy to take action lower in the organization where we're not really empowering people. And when we do, if they do something wrong, a lot of times, they get penalized or punished for it where that same thing doesn't happen up top.

Destructive leadership behaviors

The importance of an engaged organization is discussed throughout this study. When freedom of expression is discouraged, the data suggest that a culture of transparency is compromised. This quotation demonstrates a respondent's view regarding C-suite members who do not allow for differing viewpoints: "The last thing I'll tell you that comes to mind for me that I think is horrible is having people around you where everybody agrees with you. It's kind of like the king has no clothes on" (Leader # 7).

It is possible to express value for an employee through various means. One way is allowing employees to showcase their work. However, one leader spoke of the danger to the organization when a C-suite leader consistently operates with a lack of transparency. In the following excerpt, a respondent highlights behavior she refers to as that of "the personal toxic":

The personal toxic, the most difficult personal, toxic behavior that I have ever seen in a single individual is this individual loved, good, good motivational leader, like crazy smart. And he would take one team and he would say. "You guys are the best." Like right up to that finish line, he'd make a choice as to which one went forward, and which one stopped. And so, one team feels like, it felt like they absolutely failed. And because he brought them all the way through,

and he was never transparent, that he wasn't going to do one of them. Try doing that over and over again and see what happens to an organization. (Leader#8)

Two more data points suggest that undermining others (including when C-suite members undermine each other) and exercising short-term thinking indicate the presence of toxic behavior. Finally, the last data point worth mentioning concerns inauthentic behavior in C-suite members. The data suggest organizational harm in the form of toxicity occurs when C-suite members present one persona to the organization's board of directors that differs from the persona they show the rest of the organization.

Insecurity

The final second-order theme this study seeks to address as a "C-suite barrier to the C-suite effectiveness" dimension is on the subject of insecurity. Interviewees expressed their views on this behavioral trait and how destructive they view its impact on fostering a flourishing organizational culture. Leader #2 provides this viewpoint:

I think insecurity in people drives toxic behavior. Full stop, anything that sparks or encourages it the wrong way. Everything that fuels that insecurity or the worry it drives is a bad behavior. I think calling out or pointing out people's faults, looking for an escape or looking for people to blame, scapegoats, driving, driving, internal friction. So, he said that you said that, or she said it's like he said, your mom, et cetera, that kind of behavior is, it very quickly turns negative. And it's interesting because it doesn't even have to be true. You're starting to undermine—suspicion, lack of transparency, holding onto your cards again, short-term thinking. But especially everything that is that drives people to be insecure. And then you start to have people then behave differently because they're insecure. They're going to exhibit a certain

thing over, over, over or take advantage or push others down to. It very quickly trickles down. And that's probably the worst.

The data suggest that insecurity, when experienced by leaders, served as the root cause for all negative behaviors that a C-suite leader also demonstrated. One leader, for example, responded to the question, "Which C-suite behaviors make an organization's culture toxic?" with this eye-opening response:

What I would tell you, I would tell you that the root of all evil for a leader, my opinion, insecurity. It's what causes leaders to act badly. It's what causes them to fill up the room with needless conversation. It's what causes them to cut off somebody on their team who's doing a great job. And they're intimidated by that; you know what I mean? They're thinking that person's after their job or whatever they think. So, I really believe that it causes people to act out with zero-sum thinking. But those are all bad behaviors that I believe start with a leader who is not comfortable in their own skin. (Leader #12)

Qualitative theme interactions and relationships

This section identifies and details the relationship and intersectionality between the five key themes from the data (see Table 1). The themes are as follows: C-suite leaders seek a higher purpose in their roles; leader definition of culture is contextual; C-suite leaders desire certain positive behaviors and attributes for C-suite membership; C-suite leaders have two schools of thought regarding organizational culture, and C-suite behavioral barriers to C-suite effectiveness.

Table 1. Five Key Themes

Question #2	Question #3	Question #10	Question #12	Question #4
C-Suite Leaders Seek Higher Purpose in	Leader Definition of Culture is Contextual	C-Suite Behavioral Barriers to C-Suite	C-Suite Leaders' Desire Certain Positive	C-Suite Leaders Have Two Schools of Thought

Question #2	Question #3	Question #10	Question #12	Question #4
Their Roles	(background, circumstances, environment)	Effectiveness	Behaviors and Attributes for C-Suite Membership	Regarding Organizational Culture

C-suite members are empowered to provide leadership within their respective organizations. They possess positive leader behaviors and attributes and accept such roles based on a higher purpose. This study suggests that being clear about one's motive for joining an organization's C-suite is essential in how a leader approaches the role. This study revealed that leaders accepted their positions based on having trusted relationships, a desire to realize career aspirations, and a resolve to perform meaningful work. Further, this study focused on how positive leadership drives flourishing cultures and a glimpse of how toxic leadership causes the opposite.

This study sought to identify the positive behaviors and attributes that provide C-suite leaders with a roadmap for fostering flourishing organizational cultures. The data suggested that a leader should possess a suite of leadership behaviors versus having one or two. The interviews bear witness to the researcher's perception that its leaders recognize that people are imperfect. As an example, recall an interviewee's comments regarding C-suite leaders: "You don't have to be a perfect person; you've just got to be a decent person" (Leader #1). The data suggest that although imperfect, some behaviors nonetheless require 100% C-suite leader proficiency, whereas others can work to improve over time. The data also revealed a potential behavioral trait that, if

demonstrated by C-suite members, could perhaps single-handedly create a toxic organizational environment. This study will explore each of these topics in further detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter seeks to accomplish several objectives. The first objective is to summarize for the reader the impetus for conducting this inductive study design. The second objective is to summarize the qualitative findings in Chapter 4, detailing how positive C-suite leader behaviors and attributes drive flourishing organizational cultures. The third objective is to introduce an inductively created model based solely on the perspectives expressed by the C-suite executives interviewed for this study. The third emerging view is a qualitative finding for how a single negative C-suite leadership behavior drives toxic organizational environments. The fourth objective is to link the research findings and their factors for consideration to existing research, as discussed in this study's literature review section. This chapter's fifth and final objective is to provide the reader with the key points from this study and briefly discuss its theoretical implications and considerations.

Summary of Findings

This study confirmed that the C-suite leaders believe they bear responsibility for shaping the culture they desire within their organizations. They also think their behaviors, good or bad, can act as a roadmap for behaving for those they lead. These views correlate to Schein's (2004) argument that leaders create the culture, and the culture, in turn, makes the next generation of leaders. Moreover, Robbins and Coulter (2007) defined organizational culture as "the shared values, beliefs, or perceptions of employees within an organization or organizational unit" (as cited in Tsai, 2011). The

study revealed that while culture is contextual, C-suite leaders agree that culture consists of one's values, beliefs, and perceptions and is the engine for how employees get things done.

Further, the data suggest that C-suite leaders believe understanding their employees' "gumbo" is imperative for driving a flourishing culture. This understanding, C-suite members posit, is based upon the C-suite member's demonstration of a particular set of positive behavioral competencies, some of which require 100% proficiency. There is a gap in the existing literature in providing a model of the specific behaviors and attributes needed for leading and driving flourishing organizational cultures. Other bodies of literature can significantly influence and shape whether its organizational culture is flourishing or something less. When those behaviors and attributes are positive, this study's data shows how organizational flourishing is enabled. These insights surfaced most prominently when interview respondents discussed the five critical positive behaviors and attributes C-suite members must possess. The same leaders also described the C-suite behaviors they believe encourage organizational toxicity.

The five themes (see Table 1) that emerged from this qualitative study are the following: C-suite leaders seek a higher purpose in their roles, leader definition of culture is contextual, C-suite leaders desire certain positive behaviors and attributes for C-suite membership, C-suite leaders have two schools of thought regarding

organizational culture, and C-suite behavioral barriers to C-suite effectiveness. These are vital pieces in understanding how the interview respondents regard the impact of positive and not so positive leadership, the C-suite's role in shaping organizational culture, and their responsibility for ensuring their behaviors contribute to fostering flourishing work environments.

As stated earlier, the researcher's written questions used the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach. They were developed as such to allow interviewees to respond from a position of strength (Barrett & Fry, 2005). Also, of importance to the study and, therefore, by design, the allotted time enabled an environment where the interviewees could expound on the questions beyond providing simple yes or no responses. They were encouraged to respond openly and conversationally to fully articulate their views and experiences for each interview question.

The result of the rich data in the interviews was the discovery of a generative process that revealed a few key findings: (a) leaders identified eight, rather than the requested five, critical positive C-suite leader behaviors and attributes necessary for driving flourishing work cultures. For example, the data revealed that leaders view respect and integrity as the attributes C-suite leaders must possess and the behaviors they must demonstrate before acceptance into the C-suite. For this reason, interviewees felt they warranted inclusion as a baseline requirement in addition to the original five behaviors and attributes; (b) the data suggest that to drive flourishing organizations,

C-suite leaders need to possess, at a minimum, the eight identified positive behaviors and attributes: integrity, trust, respect, transparency, collaboration, empowerment, vision, and communication. These eight behaviors and characteristics, selected via coding, are based on word clouds which capture the number of times respondents mentioned a trait. The results appear via a display of word count frequency and a cloud constructed of the words used. The larger the word appears in the cloud, the more frequently the interview participants used that word.

This study includes examples of the word clouds produced, via coding, using the software MAXQDA. For example, Figure 19 is the word cloud derived from entering initial codes derived from the sub-question, “What are the five must-have positive C-suite behavior or attributes that drive flourishing organizational culture?” The dominant words were integrity, trust, respect, transparency, collaboration, empowerment, vision, and communication. As noted, eight, rather than five, dominant positive C-suite critical behaviors emerged from the data.



Figure 19. Word Cloud for Interview Question: What are the Five Must-Have Positive C-Suite Behavior Attributes that Drive Flourishing Org Culture?

Each word cloud was constructed based upon data derived from the separate coding of each of the five sub-research questions (Appendices G through K); (c) while a C-suite leader can prove less proficient in some of the eight identified behaviors, three attributes—integrity, respect, and trust—require 100% competency as interviewees regard them as the bedrock on which flourishing organizations are built; (d) the suggestion that the identified attributes are interconnected, meaning flourishing organizations require C-suite leaders who possess each of these eight behaviors and

attributes, and (e) the data suggest that beyond the competencies that leaders must demonstrate at a level of 100%, the remaining must register at levels of demonstrated high proficiency. This interviewee offers the view that there are increased expectations for members of the C-suite, one of which requires the “willingness to upskill where necessary to adapt to a shifting business landscape” (Cassidy, 2018).

Figure 20 represents the emergent Flourishing Organizational Culture Model, inductively developed utilizing the synthesized data from C-suite leader interviews.



Figure 20. Flourishing Organizational Culture Model

The model reflects the eight key positive behaviors and attributes—integrity, trust, respect, transparency, collaboration, empowerment, vision, and communication—C-suite members view as critical to their leadership in fostering flourishing

organizational cultures. The data suggest that the identified behaviors are interconnected. An imbalance in one could represent a derailer for that C-suite member's ability to lead in a manner that fosters flourishing work environments. How much of a derailer a behavioral deficiency poses depends primarily on which competency is missing or deficient. As noted earlier, trust, respect, and integrity require 100% C-suite leader competency.

Included in the interview was a question regarding respondent views on which C-suite behaviors or attributes induce toxic organizational cultures. Insecurity emerged strongly enough to merit inclusion in one of the five key themes identified for this study. However, a response by one leader deserves further discussion. Leader #12 answered the question on which C-suite behaviors make an organization toxic by stating the following: "What I would tell you, I would tell you that the root of all evil, in my opinion, is insecurity." This leader further expressed his view that insecurity causes C-suite leaders to misbehave. He concluded his response with examples of poor behavior derailers from a leader exhibiting that single negative attribute. Another leader also gave a similar reply. For this leader, insecurity in C-suite leaders "drives toxic behavior. Full stop, anything that sparks or encourages it the wrong way. Everything that fuels that insecurity or worry drives a bad behavior" (Leader #2). Figure 21 represents some of the poor behaviors identified as a consequence of insecure leaders.

Insecurity is a Key C-Suite Behavioral Derailer

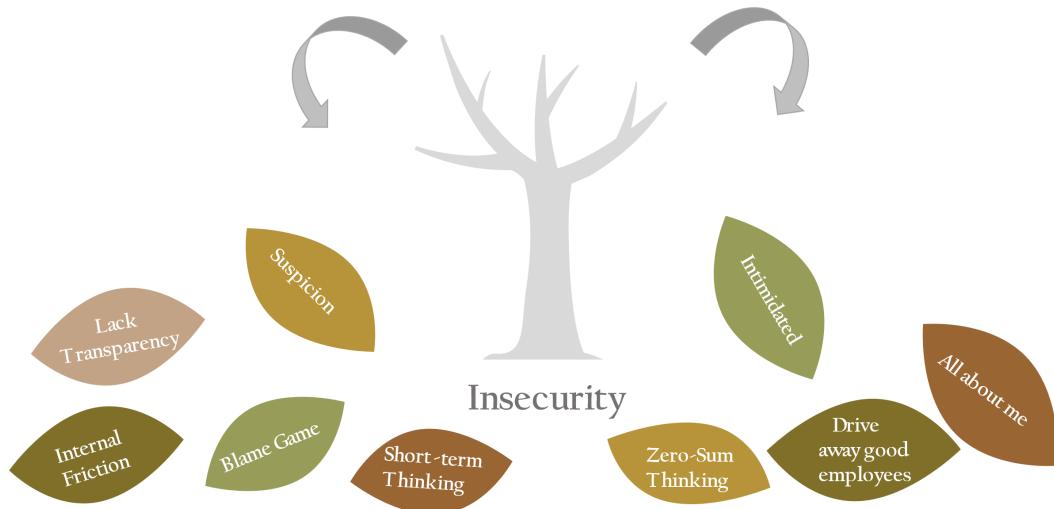


Figure 21. Insecurity is a Key C-Suite Behavioral Derailer

As suggested by the data and illustrated in Figure 21, insecurity kills flourishing environments primarily because the tone at the top of the organization is in distress. As shared by one leader, it is vital to point out that C-suite leaders who demonstrate toxic behaviors are rarely without any positive attributes. Therefore, it makes sense that leaders have, to some degree, demonstrated either competency or behavior that was deemed worthy of promotion to the C-level within their organizations. However, as one leader pointed out, toxic leaders can possess great intelligence: “The personal toxic, the most difficult personal, toxic behavior that I have ever seen in a single individual is this individual: good, good motivational leader, like crazy smart” (Leader #8).

Key Take-Aways

This study sought a response to the question, “How do positive C-suite leader behaviors and attributes drive flourishing organizational cultures?” The data revealed five key themes, and the new model, Flourishing Organizational Culture, 8 Key Positive C-suite Leadership Behaviors and Attributes, was inductively developed. Data suggest that the eight behaviors are interconnected and require specific competencies that C-suite leaders must meet 100%.

Through the generative process, a new idea emerged. This idea explores the notion that a single behavior, identified as insecurity, is the root (or originator) of all toxic C-suite leadership behavior. As such, a C-suite leader possessing this trait could well become an enabler for fostering a toxic culture.

Theoretical Implications of the Data

The data in this study may serve to influence hiring policy changes ranging from the criteria used to select C-suite members to how these same leaders contemplate the importance of organizational culture when implementing key business strategies.

The results of this study could prove helpful to early entrepreneurs who find they need to grow their organizations. This research, hopefully, will serve as a guide for enabling these growing companies to construct flourishing business environments that will ultimately serve as the bedrock of their organizations correctly the first time. Another implication for further analysis surfaced during this study’s generative

process, which discussed the necessity for C-suite members to possess 100% competency in specific attributes while functioning at a high proficiency in those remaining attributes. This discovery prompted the observation that a quantitative study could more precisely determine the statistical value associated with the requirement for a high proficiency rate for the remaining attributes not demanding 100% skill competency.

Other Considerations

There are other considerations for this research. For example, the participant view of the C-suite behavioral attributes required for flourishing organizational culture could differ based on gender, age, and experience. Looking for patterns would be an insightful addition to this research project.

Moreover, a future study might seek to identify highly successful organizational cultures examining the eight positive leadership behaviors and attributes through the lens of the flourishing culture organization's followers as the interviewee group. Finally, initiating such a study would perhaps uncover any blind spots C-suite leaders may harbor regarding what non-C-suite members need to flourish within their organizations.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the link between positive behaviors and flourishing organizational cultures. Specifically, this research investigated how demonstrating positive behaviors and attributes drive a flourishing organizational culture when demonstrated by the most senior executive leaders, known as the C-suite, within publicly traded companies.

Chapter 6 discusses the limitations and delimitations of this study, followed by the research implications, and lists further recommendations for future research. Finally, this paper concludes with the researcher's final thoughts.

Research Limitations and Delimitations

A key differentiator of qualitative and quantitative research is that qualitative research is subjective and open for interpretation. Quantitative research is data analyzed numerically and produces statistical data that correlates between variables. The inability of qualitative data to provide statistical evidence of cause-and-effect relationships renders it less reliable from a statistical viewpoint (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Furthermore, depending on the audience, providing mainly descriptive albeit empirical data could potentially render this study vulnerable to criticism.

Whatever the limitations in conducting a qualitative study, managing people, understanding what induces them to think as they do or decide to give their very best,

is not an exact science and is most often left to interpretation. Nevertheless, inductive reasoning is a beneficial aspect of qualitative research as it can open doors to further understanding the human psyche. Therefore, the application of subjective analysis in this instance was appropriate.

A second limitation to be aware of when considering there are over 6,000 publicly traded companies today is the sample size of twelve. Twelve interviews cannot provide the data and support required to declare theories. This study does not intend to present itself as the final authority on the effects of positive C-suite behavior within cultural organizations. Instead, the intent is to provide insightful information and perhaps lead the reader in the right direction for further exploration and study.

Third, as acknowledged earlier, although unintentional, the female representation was not equal to that of the male representation for those interviewed. Therefore, gaining viewpoints based on an inequitable gender distribution may have hindered the discovery of information that might have proven pertinent to this study.

Last, there was a noticeable absence of the effectiveness of storytelling as a critical positive leadership attribute and sought-after soft skill for top leaders (Choy, 2020). Simply put, none of the C-suite interviewees mentioned it. Knowing that storytelling can be highly effective, this finding was surprising.

Delimitations in this study method include how the scope of the study was managed. For example, there was an intentional focus on having only C-suite members in this study and gauging their views on positive C-suite behaviors and how they impact a flourishing organizational culture instead of interviewing and including how others outside of the C-suite viewed them. A key point in the research was to flesh out whether these leaders operate with any level of behavioral self-awareness or had any opinions or experiences to share regarding how executives in such key public company roles should behave.

Another such delimitation was the decision to broaden the scope of the study to include viewpoints from C-suite members from different companies and industries rather than interviewing entire C-suites within one to two companies. This decision eliminated the possibility of groupthink or the homogeneity of thought that sometimes occurs when groups within the same organizations participate in the interview process.

The final point regarding this study's delimitations was the inclusion of only publicly traded C-suites versus privately held companies. The major difference, yet an important one, is the necessity for publicly traded companies to report quarterly on their expected earnings. This single requirement drives more scrutiny and pressure regarding public company performance, and as such, impacts how leaders sometimes behave, the decisions they make, and, subsequently, their treatment of employees.

Implications and Recommendations

An anticipated outcome of this research was to highlight the positive behaviors deemed instrumental for creating flourishing workplace environments. However, as recent societal events have forced businesses to rethink employee expectations, the timing for literature designed to increase understanding of how best to achieve desired results has never been more appropriate. Though targeted explicitly at C-suite leaders who represent the body responsible for leading public corporations, this study is applicable and, at the very least, instructional for all entities where top leadership is responsible for guiding an organization and its people.

Another goal of this study was to strengthen the link between the world of the practitioner and the scholar. I hope scholars who teach leadership to their students, particularly those who aspire to leadership roles or are currently serving within a leadership capacity, deem it essential to call upon this research. Doing so could prove a valuable resource for its ability to articulate leader responsibility through the lens of C-suite leader practitioners.

The teachings of Schein (1990, 2004, 2017) and Eliot (1949, 2004) aided this study as it relates to leadership and culture. Seligman (2000, 2011) and Goleman (1995) provided fresh perspectives on the merits of wellbeing and emotional intelligence. Bawany (2015) provided a comprehensive list of the leadership essentials. From this literature and more as outlined in the literature review, I understood the elements that

comprise leadership, some nuanced while others are more overt. Unfortunately, as I conducted research, I could not find literature that focused explicitly on C-suite's organizational attributes to foster flourishing organizations. A frustration when conducting this study was the necessity to piece information from multiple sources and disciplines versus the ability to find scholarly researchers who directly discussed C-suite behavior as a meaningful lever for positive leadership.

The central contribution of this work is its offering of a flourishing C-suite leader behavior and attribute model borne of the perspectives of C-suite leaders. The Flourishing Organizational Culture Model depicts the necessary interconnection between the eight positive leadership competencies that the research data indicate represents the best scenario for achieving flourishing organizational cultures.

Based on this research, specific organizations, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the National Association of Securities Automated Quotations (NASDAQ), and the National Association of Corporate Boards (NACD), have a unique opportunity. These entities have a chance to expand the corporate business guidance they traditionally have provided to public companies by proactively including research like this study in their agendas.

This study revealed adjacencies and linkages to existing leadership theories. For example, the research findings flow across transformational leadership, a leadership

style that can inspire positive changes in those who follow (Cherry, 2020), and positive psychology, which focuses on employee well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Another example exists within servant leadership, a theoretical framework that advocates a leader's primary motivation and role as service to others (Greenleaf, 1970).

Though unquestionably linked, what sets these findings apart from the leadership theories previously mentioned is the depth and breadth of its focus on culture. Understanding the importance of culture and demonstrating the right behavioral competencies are tangible steps top leadership can investigate to foster flourishing organizations. Therefore, I humbly, yet proudly, present this study to contribute to the existing literature.

Finally, the completion of this study is a labor of love in two respects. The first is my hope that the information provided in this study will prompt future and existing C-suite leaders to take the steps needed, if necessary, to ensure they are delivering the best versions of themselves to those they lead. Second, as a researcher, I conducted aspects of this examination using a constructivist approach. As such, I immersed myself within the data in a profoundly personal manner and allowed for new learning and continued academic and personal growth.

Conducting this research also shed light upon my professional career as a practitioner and increased my awareness, and resolve, for why understanding workplace culture is so crucial for achieving sustained business success. I also have a better understanding of why brilliant leaders sometimes fail. Finally, my ability to meaningfully help the public and non-public boards and the organizations of which I am a member has increased due to this research.

The most rewarding aspect of completing this project was the joy in allowing the data to provide what I hope will be information practitioners and scholars can use.

Appendix A: Participant Interview Guide

First, I would like to get to know a little about your career. Please share with me your experience as a leader within a corporate company.

1. What is your role? How long have you been with the organization?
2. What originally attracted you to this role/company?
3. I have found that the term ‘culture’ is a big, esoteric concept. So, I would like to ask what culture means to you?
4. Is there a difference between how you think about the culture of the entire organization versus the culture of the C-suite? Please explain.
5. From your perspective, how do C-suite behaviors impact the rest of the organization?
6. Please tell me about a time when you witnessed another peer (within or outside your company) demonstrating great leadership that positively impacted the culture of the organization.
7. What were the specific attributes or actions that made this leader so effective?
8. Can you name a few C-suite leaders (internal to your company or external) whom you believe exemplify the positive leadership behaviors?
9. Which companies, from your perspective, have flourishing cultures and why?
10. Which C-suite behaviors, in your experience, foster toxic organizations?
11. What, in your experience, makes your organizational culture healthy?
12. If you had space in your briefcase for five C-suite positive leadership attributes only, which in your view are the most critical?

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



IRB Notice of Approval

Confirmation Number: #20210427B

Principal Investigators: Gena C. Lovett

Project Title: C-Suite Behaviors that Drive Flourishing Organizational Cultures

Renewal Date: April 27, 2022

This letter certifies that the proposed study as (received March 10 , 2021), has been approved because the Benedictine University Institutional Review Board has determined that the protocol fulfills all the necessary requirements for human subjects research.

This approval has been granted from April 27, 2021, April 27, 2022. Should you need to continue this study beyond this period, please submit to the Chairperson of the Benedictine University IRB a one-page continuation application one month prior for additional review. Include in this continuation application a brief description of the progress to date in the study and the original approval number.

Please note that this approval is for the protocol as described in your application. Should you desire to make any modification in your protocol, any and all proposed modification must be submitted to and approved by the Benedictine University IRB prior to being initiated.

Sincerely,

A. Devall

Alandra Devall, PhD
Institutional Review Board Chairperson
School of Education
5700 College Road
Benedictine University
Lisle, IL 60532
adevall@ben.edu

Appendix C. Excel Dissertation Notebook Key

Lovett Dissertation Key - Dissertation Notebook Introduction	
Tab	Explanation
Demographics	C-Suite Leader Interview Participant Information: Leader identifiers, company, tenure at current company, gender, industry, and public for-profit designation
Research Questions	Selected five (5) research sub-questions of a total of twelve (12) asked of leaders for coding because they are the most relevant and will generate data most useful to the research question.
Coding Process	Explains the general approach taken to culling information for the research process using Grounded Theory tools.
Memos	Captured memos from each interview. These notes have been used to record observations, insights, and to prompt greater reflection.
LDR 1 - 12 Coding	Twelve individual tabs detailing responses for each of the five sub-questions. Includes excerpted script from interviews, initial codes, first order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate dimensions per respondent.
2nd Order & Aggregate Dimensions	Constructed second order themes and aggregate dimensions overview for each of the 12 respondents
Gioia Model	Constructed a Gioia Model representing coding responses from the five sub-questions as provided by each of the 12 respondents. There are five (5) models using the Gioia Method.
Dimensions	Lists the five (5) dimensions culled from my research
Reflections	This is "my" tab representing a hodge-podge of things ranging from a to-do list for things I want to add, review, research, weak, or omit from this project.
Initial Coding #2, #3, #10, #12 & #4	Each are the initial codes from the twelve respondents for each sub-research question.
2nd Order Coding	Coding of 2nd Order Themes per each of the five sub-questions and their accompanying word clouds
Word Clouds #2, #3, #10, #12 & #4	One word cloud per sub-research question constructed using initial codes from each of the twelve respondents. There are five (5) word clouds.

Appendix D: Triangulation Agreement

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for agreeing to help review my qualitative coding approach and the sub-questions that I have chosen to support my research question. Your perspective is vital in helping me think about the best way to compile data that supports my research question most accurately and comprehensively. Next, I will ask that you review the transcripts I have selected. Given that I conducted 12 such interviews, I will ask you to review only two.

Next, I have culled information from raw data and compiled it into an Excel workbook. The tabs are marked per leader interview, and excerpts of each question and the corresponding codes have been included. I would like you to provide feedback regarding this information. During COVID-19 and the need to practice social distancing, thank you for agreeing to meet via Zoom to review. My goal in sharing the coding work is to ascertain whether you would develop the same or similar codes. Specifically, we will review:

The tabs representing the interview excerpts, initial, 1st-order, and 2nd-order coding, and aggregate dimensions.

The primary question I have for you is: does the logic make sense? From your point of view, is there anything I have not considered? Is there anything confusing or hard to follow? If you were conducting this research, is this a path you would consider?

I am deeply appreciative of the gift of your time in reviewing this project. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions or come across any information you deem helpful to this effort.

With best regards,
Gena

Appendix E: Interview Request Letter

From: [Gena Lovett](#)
Sent: Friday, May 14, 2021 3:00 PM
To: xxxxx
Subject: Request: Gena Lovett Dissertation Research Participation

Dear xxxxx,

I hope this note finds you well. I neglected to ask you about this when we chatted last week.

As you know, a year and a half ago I left Boeing to concentrate on my doctoral studies at Benedictine University. Happily, I am now three chapters into writing my dissertation with two more to go before I defend.

I have a small favor to ask: my dissertation question for research is, "How Do Positive C-suite Behaviors Drive Flourishing Organizational Culture?". I would love to interview you asking 12 questions regarding your thoughts about leadership. The interview is anonymous, meaning your name will not be attributed to any response. However, I would need you to sign a consent form as it will be kept on file for seven years with my dissertation Chair as per an International Review Board requirement.

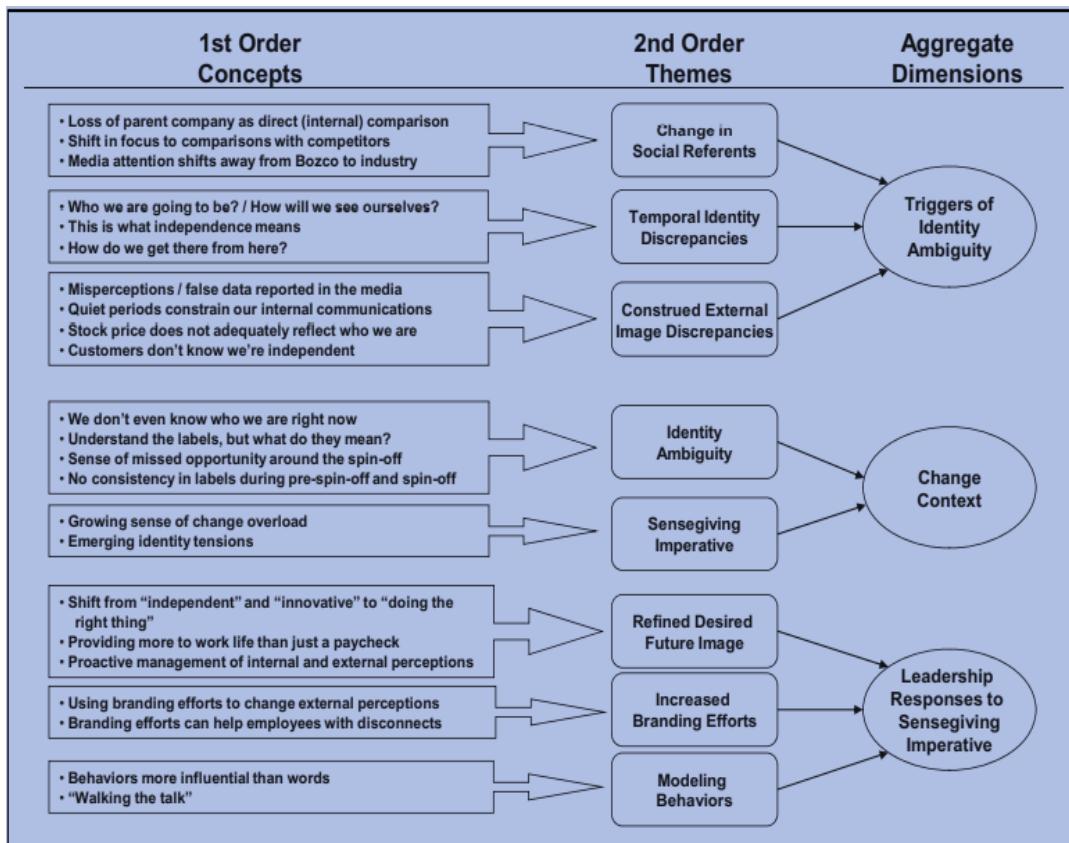
The interview should take no more than 45 minutes to an hour. You have a wide range of leadership experience and I believe your insights would prove invaluable. I am interviewing two C-suite members from each company selected. Since I do not know anyone within your leadership team, I would greatly appreciate it if you could direct me to someone within your c-suite team who would be willing to participate.

Is this something you are able to support? I would like to complete all interviews by end of June 2021. Happy to answer any questions you may have about the process.

Very best,
Gena Lovett

Sent from [Mail](#) for Windows 10

Appendix F: The Gioia Method Model



Source: Adapted from Gioia et al. (2013)

Appendix G: Word Cloud Interview Question:

What Attracted You to the Company/Role?



Appendix H: Word Cloud Interview Question:

What Does Culture Mean to You?



Appendix I: Word Cloud Interview Question:

Which C-Suite Behaviors Make an Organization's Culture Toxic?



Appendix J: Word Cloud for Interview Question:

Is There a Difference Between How You Think About the Culture of the Entire Organization versus the Culture of the C-Suite? Please explain.



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