Exploring the Perception of Leadership Development Among Occupants of Middle-Level

Organizational Roles

By

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(Under the Direction of Dr. Andrew Jackson)

This qualitative interview study sought to explore the perception of participation in leadership development among occupants of middle-level organizational roles. The research questions focused on the impact of participation in a leadership development program and the personal, organizational, relational and training factors affecting perception of programming. Utilizing a semi-structured interview design, data were gathered from seven participants who were members of previous cohorts of the leadership program serving as the setting the study. Nine themes affecting perception emerged from the data: skill development, personal growth, career growth, team support and development, team communication, mentoring, networking and peer relationships, topic applicability and concept review. This study aimed to add to the breadth of research by (1) presenting the leadership development experiences of occupants of middle-level organizational roles and (2) providing insights that may aid in developing targeted leadership development programs for members of this group who serve as a bridge between the upper and lower levels in an organization.

Keywords: leadership, leadership theory, leadership training, leadership development, training transfer, knowledge transfer, middle level, organizational hierarchy, mentoring, team development, team communication, networking, peer relationships, skills development, personal development, career development

EXPLORING THE PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG

OCCUPANTS OF MIDDLE-LEVEL ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES

by

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DEDICATION

To all who think they're too old to start something new …

You're not. Get to it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is crucial to the success of any organization, yet defining leadership has

proven to be complex. The concepts of leader and leadership have been known for centuries, yet

scientific research on the topics began in the 20th century (King, 1990). Multiple researchers

have attempted to provide context regarding the concept of leadership. Vroom and Jago (2007)

surmised leadership leverages others' abilities. Nahavandi (2015) denoted leadership is a social

phenomenon among groups.

Literature has centered around a common purpose of leadership—solving problems by

organizing followers to create solutions (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). For the purposes of this study,

Northouse's (2019, p. 43) definition of leadership as a "process whereby an individual influences

a group of individuals to achieve a common goal." Leadership in organizations is commonly

hierarchical in nature with layers between upper and lower levels (Chun et al., 2009). The

composition of positions at the middle level tends to be broad; however, these middle-level

organizational roles are usually managers or supervisors. While considered essential to an

organization, as they are usually responsible for operations and processes (Drucker, 2007),

managerial roles tend to be cast as lacking leadership capabilities (Kraaijenbrink, 2022).

While there is a distinction between leadership and management, occupants of middle-

level organizational roles may employ both types of behaviors in execution of their role and their

relationship with subordinates. These roles may be seen as being more comfortable with change,

well-prepared, thorough and encouraging of teamwork (Kanter, 2004). They also possess day-to-

day expertise, relationships with individuals on multiple levels, and an understanding of the

organization's goals, governance and politics that influence decision-making (Farrell, 2014). More of this distinction will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Research regarding the role of those at the middle level has focused on organizational performance. The middle level is key to the success of a system (Conger & Fulmer, 2003) in that these roles serve as a bridge between internal shareholders (Kuratko et al., 2005). As upper levels are less specialized than lower levels (Burns, 1957), companies that actively listen to those at the middle level see success with projects due to this level's creativity, diversity of thought and ability to achieve outcomes set by the upper level (Huy, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

Demand has increased across industries for employees with capacity to manage organizational strategies, changes, and human capital. Billions of dollars are spent annually to increase this capacity through leadership development (Yemiscigil et al., 2023). Global companies such as Delta Airlines, Southern Company and Chick-fil-A highlight leadership development as a benefit of employment, while other organizations advertise leadership development consulting services. However, return on investment for leadership development programming has been poor (Westfall, 2019). Questions regarding program effectiveness include perceived benefits of participation (Grossman & Salas, 2011) and what amount of acquired knowledge is transferred in the workplace (Ford et al., 2018). Additional issues with current programming include a lack of skill applicability, a lack of knowledge regarding organizational culture, and a lack of measurement tools to determine success (McCauley & Palus, 2021).

Leadership development for middle level organizational roles require special considerations due to (1) the range of positions within this level being broad; (2) the need to manage relationships with both upper and lower levels; and (3) how this level impacts the

performance of the lower level to meet the directives from the upper level (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Yet, there is little research on how occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development or how programming should be crafted to meet the needs of this group.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the perception of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles who have participated in a leadership development program at a university in Atlanta, Georgia. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles describe the impact of participation in a leadership development program?

2. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development based on personal, organizational, relational and training factors?

Use of the language "occupants of middle-level organizational roles" here is intentional. While study respondents participated in a leadership development program, there was no attempt to categorize them as leaders or assume the program created leaders. Rather, the study adopted language based on participant responses described in Chapter 4, as they referred to themselves as leaders or discussed behaviors outlined in literature as those employed by leaders.

The PORT Framework

Conceptual frameworks are used in research to frame current literature, identify gaps in literature and outline the methodology of a study (Varpio et al., 2020). The PORT framework was developed as the conceptual framework for this study to understand how participants define and interpret their individual realities regarding leadership development. The acronym represents

the four areas of the framework: Personal factors, Organizational factors, Relational factors and Training factors.

Personal Factors

Personal factors that may affect a participant's perception may include self-efficacy, skills, competencies, goals and motivation. Self-efficacy, or a trainee's belief they can successfully reach a goal, and the trainee's choice of what knowledge to apply in which context play a role in knowledge acquisition and application (Baldwin et al., 2009). Holton's model (1996) also surmised that learning is influenced by a trainee's reactions to the learning process, the trainee's motivation to learn, and a trainee's ability to learn. The goals set by a program participant also play a crucial role in the perception of leadership development, as those who participate in a program may have different experiences based on anticipated outcomes (Johnson et al., 2012). Ultimately, participants must also make the decision to apply knowledge received (Ford et al., 2018).

Organizational Factors

Success with leadership development may be influenced by the organization's culture, goals and expectations. First, workplace culture is an influential factor in an employee's belief in their ability to apply knowledge (Bell et al., 2017), as employees may not feel supported to implement new strategies or make changes. Next, leadership goals and expectations may also be incongruent with the application of acquired knowledge (Beer et al., 2016), as what is taught in programming may not be the needs of the organization. Lastly, while some task-related knowledge transfer may be measurable through quantifiable outcomes, it may be difficult to measure knowledge transfer of soft skills such as conflict management, team building or communication (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2016).

Relational Factors

Relational factors that may affect perception include participants' interactions with peers, superiors, and subordinates. Relationships can have significant effects on perceptions of leadership development and the application of knowledge, as those who felt supported by their supervisors, peers, and subordinates acknowledged an influence on their development (Tingle et al., 2017). Supervisor and peer support were also significant in the application of knowledge (Yaghi & Bates, 2020), as were resources such as feedback from mentors, superiors and subordinates (Day et al., 2021). The upper-level's identification of goals that support the organization and participants also affect knowledge transfer (McCauley & Palus, 2021), as middle and lower levels are provided measurable outcomes with definitive directives.

Training Factors

Training factors that may impact perceptions of leadership development include elements such as the program's curriculum, instructors, and mode of delivery. Program developers should outline training objectives based on the needs and strategy of the organization (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). Training methods such as providing theories, mirroring real-world scenarios, giving and receiving feedback, and continued learning opportunities after performance have been outlined as effective in training design (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). An analysis of trainers, needs, objectives and learning principles may aid in developing a successful program (Ford et al., 2018).

These four factors were determined after reviewing key themes identified in through review of literature regarding leadership, leadership development and middle-level organizational roles and are reflected in RQ2. The framework is presented as Figure 1.

Figure 1

The PORT Framework
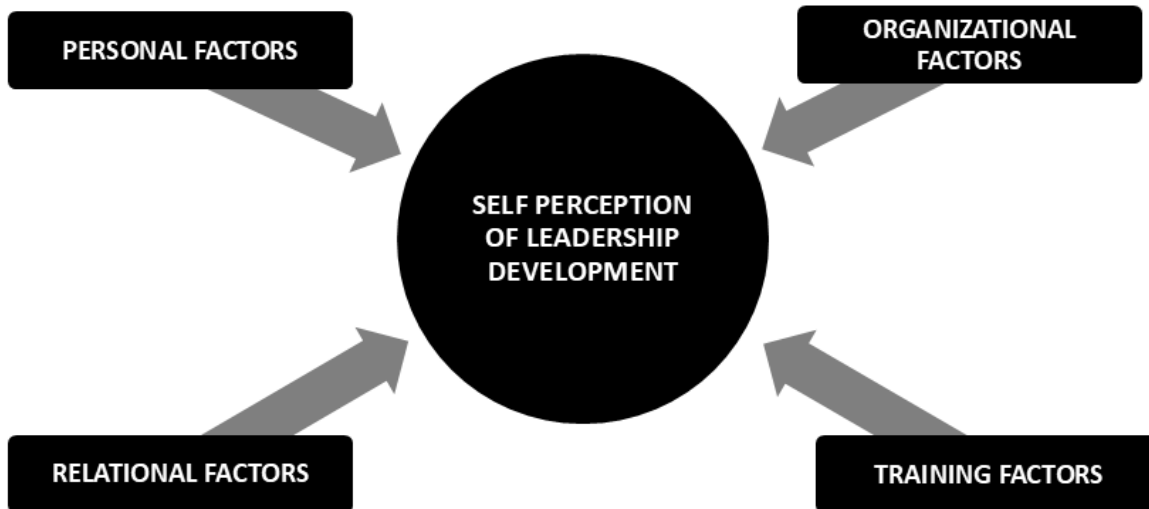
Creating One's Reality: Constructivism

Viewing these factors through a constructivism lens allows for each participant's account to be framed in the context of the conceptual framework, in that (1) one or more factors may affect an individual participant's perception of leadership development, and (2) the participants' perceptions may not be affected by the same factors. As a paradigm, constructivism was first championed by Piaget (1923), who purported that habits and recollections build intelligence. Individuals seek to understand their world with researchers providing opportunities for their views and experiences to be shared (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a learning theory, constructivism acknowledges how learning is crafted by adding newly acquired information to what is already known (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Constructivism is also applicable to the

instruction level, as instructors provide learning opportunities whereby learners understand relationships between concepts (Stapleton & Stefaniak, 2018).

A common pattern in leadership development programming is a focus on the participant, the team and the organization. For example, Delta Airline's Leadership Program (Georgia Institute of Technology, n.d.) offered sessions on leading high performance teams, business strategy and decision-making while providing opportunities for networking. Southern Company (Southern Company, 2023) links its development to its business needs, such as emotional intelligence and innovation. Chick-fil-A (Chick-fil-A, n.d.) centers its program on managing priorities and relationships and skill development. The leadership development program serving as the setting for this study follows this pattern and is outlined in three parts: self (leadership styles, feedback, communication and mentoring), others (relationships and team management), and the business (decision-making and change management).

Theories have been developed to explore how organizations are viewed based on their interrelated components (Von Bertalanffy, 1972), with considerations to elements such as organizational goals, the developed hierarchy, and an evaluation process (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Dreier et al. (2019) centered address organizational change on three areas: the individual, through collaboration and skill building; the community, through alliance and action; and the system, through understanding of structure.

The following assumptions have been made utilizing constructivism as a paradigm and learning theory: (1) occupants of middle-level organizational roles will define their own realities by using their experiences to make sense of the education received through leadership development, and (2) each person's reality may change upon their return to their roles after

participation in a leadership development program, thereby determining how they regard their ability to employ acquired knowledge, thus affecting the perception of impact.

Importance of the Study

Literature regarding leadership development focus on issues such as participant experience, skills and self-development (Day et al., 2014) or on leadership theories and aspects such as behaviors, feedback, networking and coaching (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). Literature regarding middle-level organizational roles focus on where they land in the hierarchy and their contribution to the organization (Rezvani, 2017) or the competencies needed at the middle level (Sudirman et al., 2019). Yet, there is a marked gap in literature at the intersection of leadership development and middle-level organizational roles. Exploring the perception of leadership development among occupants of middle-level organizational roles may increase the understanding of how this level contributes to the overall achievement of an organization and how best to train new occupants to understand their roles and apply the knowledge acquired.

While the curricula of leadership development are driven by the goals and objectives of the organization and its leadership, leadership has a responsibility to provide growth opportunities for employees. Exploring the middle-level experiences with leadership development may increase understanding of the development needs of middle- and lower-level roles, which may result in structuring a curriculum that provides maximum return on investment.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study was intended to gain insight into of the perspectives of occupants of middle-level organizational roles who have participated in a leadership development program and the potential personal, organizational, relational, or training-related factors that related to the impact of programming. Chapter 1 provided a brief overview of the study, the purpose of the study and

research questions, the conceptual framework and the importance of the study. Chapter 2 examines literature related to leadership, leadership theories, the middle-level organizational role, and historical and current practices of leadership development. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative study design. Chapter 4 provides the findings from data analysis. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative interview study is to explore the perception of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles who have participated in a leadership development program at a university in Atlanta, Georgia. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles describe the impact of participation in a leadership development program?

2. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development based on personal, organizational, relational and training factors?

This chapter presents historical and current research on the topics of leadership, leadership theories, leadership development and middle-level organizational roles. The analysis of prior literature is crucial to academic inquiry. Literature reviews provide an examination of historical and current research of an issue (Snyder, 2019). Literature analyzed and presented in a literature review should be based on research questions and exclude any unrelated data (Xiao & Watson, 2017).

A narrative literature review is presented, as it allows for an overall objective synthesis of the research (Juntunen & Lehenkari, 2019). Two methods, database searches and snowball selection were used to identify relevant literature, as these two methods are thought to produce a greater percentage of relevant research (Wohlin et al., 2022). The literature was subsequently

organized by pertinent themes and concepts related to the purpose of the study and research questions to gather understanding of existing research.

Characterizing Leadership

Leadership is crucial to the success of any organization, yet defining leadership has proven to be complex. The concepts of leader and leadership have been known for centuries, yet scientific research on the topics began in the 20th century (King, 1990). Multiple researchers have attempted to provide context regarding the concept of leadership. Hogan and Kaiser (2005) presumed leaders persuade followers to overlook their own self-interest for the good of the organization. Vroom and Jago (2007) surmised leadership leverages others' abilities. Nahavandi (2015) denoted leadership is a social phenomenon among groups. Daly et al. (2015) proposed that a person's leadership foundation is formed early in life.

Researchers have also discussed the role of leaders. Leaders are responsible for the culture and climate of an organization (Nahavandi, 2015) and are influential when followers believe in their integrity, thus inspiring confidence in their team (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Northouse, 2019). Leaders also influence an organization's climate through their leadership style, and behaviors (Warrick, 2017).

Several studies have discussed the potential traits possessed by leaders. For example, Stogdill's (1948) review of research studies found that character and trustworthiness rated high as a leadership trait. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) considered leadership to be predicated on character, values, choices and actions. Two common traits have been noted in leadership research: influence and intelligence.

Influence

Many leadership theories indicate that influence is one of the most important traits or behaviors. Leaders are influential when followers believe in their integrity, thus inspiring confidence in their team (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Northouse, 2019). Leaders also influence an organization's climate through their values, leadership style and behaviors (Warrick, 2017). Leaders attract others by communicating a vision; being considered consistent and trustworthy; and understanding of their strengths and weaknesses (Bennis, 1984). Barriers to influence include position in the hierarchical structure, a difference in the goals of those involved, competition within the relationship, and opposing performance measures (Cohen & Bradford, 2017).

Intelligence

Leadership intelligence refers to a leader's ability to learn quickly, understand sophisticated ideas, and create solutions (Cavazotte et al., 2012). This behavior may manifest through seeing and communicating the big picture, deciphering the actions needed to create change, and regulating the stress of that change. Leaders may display leadership intelligence through grouping workers according to their purpose or their process (Simon, 1946), thereby mobilizing the efforts of followers moves toward organizational effectiveness (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

Leadership is relevant to the goals and actions of the followers and changes in personnel, goals or outside influences can alter a situation; therefore, one can be a leader in one situation but not in another (Stogdill, 1948). Bolden (2004, p. 14) considered leadership as a circumstance affecting "organizational, social and personal processes." For the purposes of this study,

Northouse's (2019, p. 43) definition of leadership as a "process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" has been adopted.

Researchers have outlined a distinction between leadership and management functions. While managers can exhibit leadership traits, managers are considered responsible for the day-to-day operations of ensuring the goals outlined by leaders are accomplished (Drucker, 2007). Bennis and Goldsmith (2010) suggested that leaders are responsible for providing direction, whereas managers are responsible for supervising procedures. Leadership focuses on creating policy, while management focuses on executing policy within limits imposed by higher leadership (Stivers, 2003). However, those who have been promoted to managerial roles tend to focus on measurable outcomes (Bennis, 2003). Management may drive organizational success through implementing processes and coordinating the efforts of the followers to achieve organizational goals. Zaleznik (2004) surmised that management focuses on efficiently solving problems. Table 1 summarizes the differences between leadership and management.

Table 1

Differences between Leadership and Management

Leadership	Management
Creates a vision	Manages day-to-day operations
Focuses on long-term results	Coordinates the efforts of followers
Uses behaviors to call to action	Focuses on measurable outcomes

Note: Adapted from Administration Versus Management: A Reading from Beyond the Boundaries, C. Stivers, 2003

While this study acknowledges the differences between leadership and management, it does not label the study participants as leaders or managers. Rather, the focus of the study was on how those who happen to occupy middle level organizational roles, which may be commonly

considered managerial, perceive leadership development. The organization worked with practitioners to determine what type of programming was needed for this level.

However, this study does acknowledge that both leaders and managers may apply necessary leadership behaviors and strategies. These include developing a team vision and goals that align with the organization's vision; influencing a team to perform at peak capacity; developing a positive team culture; and developing solutions to accomplish goals or adapt to change.

Leadership Theories and Behaviors

The attempts to define leadership, as well as the purposes of leadership, lead to discussions on what makes one a leader. Early discussions of leadership theory focused on several types, such as military leadership as discussed by Sun Tzu; democratic leadership as discussed by Plato and Aristotle; and political leadership as presented by Machiavelli (Grint, 2010). Vugt and Ronay (2014) attribute the shifts in leadership theory to a group or society's need to solve recurring problems and manage internal and external conflicts. These shifts moved from heroic and trait theories to more relational and conditional theories.

Heroic and Trait Leadership Theories

The assumption that leadership was trait driven, not context driven, led to what researchers termed heroic leadership (Vroom & Jago, 2007). The Great Man Theory, championed by Thomas Carlyle, purported that leaders were born, not made, and that those who become leaders do so through the traits they inherently possess (Khan et al., 2016). Max Weber championed Charismatic Leadership Theory, asserting that a person's authority is not vested in laws or titles, but in the faith bestowed on the leader by followers (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). This faith is nurtured by trust in the leader, acceptances of the leader's vision and the leader's

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perceived sacrifice (Conger et al., 2000). This "idealized influence" encourages followers to see

their leaders in an exemplary light, focusing on what they deem as important to them (Sarros &

Santora, 2001). Table 2 summarizes Heroic and Trait leadership theories. Though these theories

would ultimately be challenged, elements of these theories can be seen in the setting for this

study through the use of self and peer assessments and discussion of leadership styles.

Table 2

Summary of Heroic and Trait Leadership Theories

Theory	Great Man	Charismatic
Author	Carlyle, 1840	Weber, 1947
Leadership Behavior	Traits determined a leader's power and influence	Based on faith and trust in the leader
Primary Focus	Leader	Leader
Results	Those who possess certain traits should ascend to leadership	Followers accept the leader's vision and perceived sacrifice

Note: Adapted from *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, P.G. Northouse, 2019, SAGE
Publications.; *The Theory of Charismatic Leadership*, R.C. Tucker, 1968, Daedalus

These theories were challenged in the early 20th century, as questions arose as to if the

traits were common and transferable (Cowley, 1928). Researchers continued to formulate views

that based on previous theories, general traits should be measurable and applicable (Vroom &

Jago, 2007). However, an inability to detect certain traits in all effective leaders led to

reconsideration of the theory (Khan et al., 2016). Stogdill (1948, p. 65) found significant

fluctuation in research surrounding the traits of leaders, noting, "It becomes clear that an

adequate analysis of leadership involves not only a study of leaders, but also of situations."

Relational Leadership Theories

The discussion of leadership theories began to shift from heroic leadership to more

collaborative, transactional, and individual-based leadership theories. Subsequent research began

focusing on the relationship between leadership and followership. The theories listed below are categorized as relational theories due to their focus on the interactions between leaders and followers and how those interactions benefit these groups and the organization. Elements of these models may be employed in training transfer by middle-level leaders as they consider their relationships with superiors and subordinates.

Behavioral Theory

Behavioral Theory focuses on the behaviors and actions of the leader that help followers feel empowered to accomplish goals (Northouse, 2019). A pivotal study in leadership behavior conducted at Ohio State University focused on the actions of leaders engaged in a leadership process. Identified behaviors related to expectations were maintenance of performance standards; critique of performance and equal treatment for group members; while identified behaviors related to the well-being of the group were being attentiveness, support, and accessibility (Meng, 2018). Leadership development programs support this theory by focusing on leadership behavior and skills (Benmira & Agboola, 2021).

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

The Ohio State leadership studies were pivotal for the development of additional leadership theories. Leader-Member Exchange Theory suggests that leaders will employ different leadership strategies dependent on the leader's relationship with the follower, which affects the behaviors and attitudes of both parties (Liden et al., 1997). While these relationships begin with discovering similarities, they will continue through clear expectations, an understanding of the follower's needs and concerns, and the willingness to help followers identify and address issues (Meng, 2018).

Path-Goal Theory

Path-Goal theory focuses on motivation of followers. Championed in the 1970s, Path-Goal shifted the onus of the leader to understanding what motivated followers to complete tasks. The theory was borne out of a need to integrate prior research regarding the relationship between a leader's ability to focus on tasks and people and the subsequent satisfaction and output from followers (House, 1996).

Transformational and Transactional Leadership

Transformational leadership relates to the needs, values, motives, and goals of followers (Northouse, 2019). Developed by James Burns in 1978, the theory focuses on moving followers to leaders through empowerment and goal alignment (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transactional leadership focuses on bargaining between leaders and followers, through rewards or punishment. Overall improvement in service and production may occur, though there may be situational challenges (McCleskey, 2014).

Table 3 summarizes the Behavioral, Path-Goal, Leadership-Member Exchange, Transformational and Transactional leadership theories. Elements of these theories can be seen in the program serving as the setting for this study, through sessions focusing on collaboration, workforce diversity, organizational bias and managing adversity. Opportunities are also presented for mentoring and networking.

Table 3

Summary of Relational Leadership Theories

Theory	Behavioral	Path-Goal	Leader-Member Exchange	Transformational	Transactional
Author	Stogdill, 1948	Evans, 1970 House, 1971	Dansereau, Graen and Haga, 1975	Burns, 1978 Bass, 1985	Burns, 1978
Leadership Behavior	Task-oriented Relationship-oriented	Providing a productive work environment to produce successful outcomes	Defined by the needs of in-groups and out-groups	Assessment of followers' values and goals	Beneficial exchange occurs between leader and follower
Primary Focus	Leader	Follower	Followers	Followers Organization	Followers
Results	Leader determines best behavior to employ based on relationship with follower	Leader's behavior adds to or supplements needs in a work environment	Leader focuses on follower motivation to determine goals and support levels	Visionary leadership uses followers' motives to accomplish goals	Efforts of followers are conditional, often based on rewards

Note: Adapted from *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, P.G. Northouse, 2019, SAGE Publications.

Conditional Leadership Theories

Previously discussed leadership theories have focused on traits, behaviors, and relationships. However, in discussing these theories, researchers have continuously referred to these traits being applied to varying situations—that the situation will determine the traits and behaviors displayed or the relationships transacted. Condition-driven theories, therefore, suggest that leadership is influenced by multiple variables, including the issues to be addressed or the people involved (Khan et al., 2016). Elements of these models may be employed in training

transfer by middle-level leaders as they consider the nature of the tasks required or changes that may need to be implemented.

Contingency Leadership

Fiedler's (1964) contingency leadership model developed through categorization of groups, noting a leadership style that works in with one group may not work in another. Factors in this model included the power of the leader, the relationship between the leader and the followers, and the tasks for completion. He deduced that a leader that has the respect of his followers, a structured task, and authority and influence will find leadership easier than one in which these circumstances do not align. Fiedler's contention was that if leadership style is fixed, it should be employed where best suited to determine effectiveness (Benmira & Agboola, 2021).

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership, contend Hogan and Kaiser (2005), has been a tool used for survival for individuals and groups for millennia. Championed by Heifetz (1994), research on adaptive leadership focused on situational assessment and value judgements. There are three different situational challenges that leaders must face in adaptive leadership: (1) defined technical challenges that have known solutions that can be employed immediately based on current skills; (2) defined technical and adaptive challenges that may require leaders and followers to work together to develop solutions; and (3) adaptive challenges that are not readily identifiable and must be solved through innovation. These challenges may rely on the leader and followers to reject previous notions or values in search of finding a solution (Northouse, 2019).

Situational Leadership

Situational leadership was championed in the early 20th century. Cowley (1928, p. 151) surmised that "leadership is a function of a definite situation and that we cannot talk about

leadership traits in general but that instead we must talk about leadership traits in particular situations." Hersey et al. (1979) surmised that different skills of leadership will be employed based on situations presented. Situational leadership theory (SLT) has its basis in the intersection of task behavior, which is the amount of direction provided by the leader; relationship behavior, which is the amount of social and emotional support provided by the leader; and a follower's readiness to complete specific tasks (Schermerhorn, 1997). In SLT, two leadership types exist: task-oriented or directing styles, where leaders define roles, give clear instruction, create patterns, and outline direct communication avenues; and relation-oriented or supportive styles, focus on caring for followers, reduction in conflicts and providing avenues for all to participate (Northouse, 2019).

Table 4 summarizes the Contingency, Adaptive and Situational leadership theories. More recent leadership development programs may incorporate these theories. As an example, the setting of this study presents sessions on developing strategy and managing change.

Table 4

Summary of Conditional Leadership Theories

Theory	**Contingency**	**Adaptive**	**Situational**
Author	Fiedler, 1964	Heifetz, 1994	Hersey & Blanchard, 1977
Leadership Behaviors	Authority Influence Effectiveness	Vision Adaptability Calm Focus Encouragement Discernment	Direction Support Reassurance Laissez-faire
Primary Focus	Leader Follower	Leader	Leader Follower
Results	Leaders will employ influential behaviors based on the group	Leaders aid in creating an environment in which followers work to solve problems	Leaders and followers work together to solve problems

Note: Adapted from A Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness, F.E. Fiedler, 1964, Advances in Experimental Social Psychology; The Work of Leadership, R. Heifetz and D.L. Laurie, 1997, Harvard Business Review; Situational Leadership® after 25 years: A retrospective, K. Blanchard, D. Zigarmi and R. Nelson, 1993, Journal of Leadership Studies

Leadership Development

The discussion of leadership theory acknowledges that leadership style and behaviors play a role in what knowledge behaviors and skills are used to create change or solve problems. Therefore, developing leadership behaviors and skills is crucial in highly competitive markets, particularly when problems require more than one person or a small team (Dalakoura, 2010). Petrie (2014) surmised that there are two types of leadership development: horizontal, where knowledge, skills and competencies are acquired, and vertical, where one can think more systematically and strategically. Leadership development, therefore, is future facing, as the goal is to influence future behaviors and actions (Allen et al., 2021). Early leadership development

programs were more classroom-based, provided by business schools and specialized companies; however, this method is declining due to a rise in organizations requesting assessment of skill acquisition and application (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019).

Incorporating Adult Learning Theories

A mix of knowledge and real-world experience to apply knowledge may prove valuable in fortifying project management skills through leadership development experiences (Gurdjian et al., 2014). As programs develop, adult learning theories have been incorporated in recent leadership development programs. Experiential learning, as theorized by Kolb in the 1980s, involves understanding real-world situations through experience, reflection, conception and action and may involve collaboration (Morris, 2019), with examples such as role play, simulations, games and case studies. Cooperative or collaborative learning may incorporate active, project or team-based learning through small groups (Johnson & Johnson, 2018), such as reflective sharing or peer facilitation. Cohort-based learning may create an environment inclusive of network building, peer coaching and peer accountability (Bialek & Hagen, 2021). However, three adult learning theories are considered foundational (Merriam, 2018) and may have influence on leadership development programming: andragogy, self-directed learning and transformative learning.

Andragogy

Andragogy, originally championed by Alexander Kapp in 1833 and formally recognized by Franz Poggeler in 1957, distinguished adult learning from child learning. Under this idea forwarded by Malcolm Knowles in the 1960s, the "why" becomes a key factor in learning; experiences become learning resources, learning becomes more task-oriented; the learning approach shifts to being more problem centered for immediate application; and the drive for

learning becomes more internal (Loeng, 2018). Application in leadership development programs may include activities such as self-reflective journaling, team exercises or discussion of real-world examples (McCauley et al., 2017).

Self-Directed Learning

Knowles suggested that adult learning occurred on a spectrum, from instructor-directed to self-directed (Merriam, 2018). Self-directed learning theory, championed by Allen Tough in the 1970s, accounts for a learner's self-assessed needs, goals, learning methods, and resources (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Informal self-directed learning methods may include everyday workplace activities, such as observation or interaction with colleagues (Lemmetty & Collin, 2019), while formal methods may incorporate setting personal goals and deadlines or continued education through reading or short courses.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning focuses on making sense of defining experiences, allowing for changes in thought, action and behaviors (Mezirow, 1997). Constructing the meaning of experiences influences a learner's motivation to participate in development (Dirkx, 1998). In this construction, sudden experiences may prompt new ways of handling issues through new perspectives (Merriam, 2018). Application in leadership development may involve real-world experiences followed by reflection and feedback (Johnson, 2008).

Table 5 summarizes the three theories and concepts considered foundational to adult learning and their potential application in leadership development. However, the program in this study incorporates elements of all theories listed above.

Table 5

Adult Learning Theories, Concepts and Examples of Activities

Theory/Concept	Andragogy	Self-Directed	Transformative
Champion	Kapp, 1833 Poggeler, 1957 Knowles, 1960s	Tough, 1970s	Mezirow, 1997
Factors	Understanding the "why" of learning Experiences as learning resources Learning more task oriented Approach is more problem-centered for immediate application	Accounts for learner's self-assessed needs and goals May be formal or informal	Allows for changes in thought, action and behavior Meaning of experiences influences motivation to participate Maturity levels and sudden experiences prompt new actions and perspectives
Example of Activities	Self-reflective journaling Team exercises Real-world discussions	Observation Colleague interaction Goal setting Continued education such as reading or short courses	Real-world experience followed by reflection and feedback

Effective Leadership Development

There are numerous elements in leadership development programming, such as an understanding of the organization's needs, selection of the best participants, quality content development and delivery, and an evaluation of effectiveness. While organizations seek programming that will result in increased leadership capacity, increased knowledge transfer, and positive organizational outcomes, consideration must be given to the program's components.

Organizational Needs

Prior to developing or sourcing a leadership development program, an organization should determine the objectives that are crucial to the organization's success (Cacioppe, 1998). An organization must also determine the goals of the leadership development program by assessing its needs to ensure the program aligns with its strategy (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). It is also important to understand and review the leadership gaps in the organization to best determine how leaders should be developed to fill those gaps. The needs assessment should incorporate data from internal and external sources such as analysis of current organizational challenges and future trends (Beeson, 2004).

Trainee Selection

Trainee selections should be based on the correlation between organizational initiatives, succession, and high potential (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). Part of this cycle should be determining if the participant has long-term potential and which trajectory is most suited for their development (Beeson, 2004). Effective development programs also provide appraisals of performance and reward participants for implementation of strategies that contribute to the overall improvement of the organization. This support helps underscore the supportive culture and goal of continued engagement (Groves, 2007).

Content Development and Delivery

In the program development process, organizations should select the most effective methods and instructors for content delivery, which underscores the relationship between the organization and the facilitator (Cacioppe, 1998). Additionally, the program must be supported; therefore, it must be engrained in the organizations culture and allow for growth (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). This supportive culture includes actively encouraging leadership development

among employees as a long-term strategy (Amagoh, 2009). Baldwin and Ford (1988) outlined five principles in training design: identical elements, where elements of training mirror settings where application is expected to occur; general principles, where trainees are provided with rules and theories; stimulus variability, where participants are introduced to various scenarios instead on a single scenario; conditions of practice, including clustered or parceled training, and the giving and receiving of feedback; and overlearning, where participants continue to receive training after successful performance.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

An important part of an effective leadership development program is evaluation of its effectiveness. An effective program has proactively outlined objectives, behaviors, and desired outcomes, thereby having a benchmark to compare change or growth (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). A program may be effective if there is capacity created to fill leadership roles, increased commitment to the organizational strategy, and a better grasp on how the organization functions. Additional considerations are if participants perceived the program as valuable; whether knowledge was obtained; and if the knowledge resulted in changed behavior, enhanced skills, or applied knowledge (Cacioppe, 1998).

Knowledge transfer is also a measure of effectiveness. Knowledge transfer is influenced by factors such as understanding of the training material, potential rewards for applying knowledge and skills, employee motivation and self-efficacy, opportunities to apply training and adjust as needed, clear accountability and expectations, and support from leadership and peers (Laker, 1990). According to Santos and Stuart (2003), managers reverted to previous work styles after leadership training or were less likely to apply training immediately due to habit, no time to practice what was learned, or content not being applicable to their needs.

Ineffective Leadership Development

Ineffective programs can prove costly to organizations in multiple ways, including employee turnover on all levels, poor team performance, lack of the lower level's professional development, and creation of a toxic work culture (Smith, 2017). Issues with current leadership development commonly include a lack of clear direction, a lack of knowledge regarding the culture of the organization and a lack of effective measurement tools (McCauley & Palus, 2021).

Lack of Clear Direction

Organizations may acquire or produce development programs without considering organizational needs, yet programs tailored to needed competencies and goals may produce desired outcome (Gleeson, 2019). Organizations must also determine if those trained fit into the organizational culture and can lead teams through necessary organizational changes to reduce the potential negative effects (Warrick, 2017).

No Measurable Outcomes

Evaluation of development programs is a critical issue, as programs should be evaluated on participant learning, participant performance, and their effects on organizational results (Holton, 1996). Organizations continue to face challenges in ensuring programs are purposeful and can be evaluated (Day, 2000). Some outcomes may prove difficult to quantify, such as those involving soft skills and individual behaviors (Santos & Stuart, 2003). There may also be different interpretations of how to effectively evaluate a program (Mertens & Wilson, 2019).

Training the Wrong Leaders

Ineffective programs may also result in ineffective leadership. Programs assume that development will make better leaders; however, this may not be the case (Salicru, 2020). For example, organizations may promote technical experts to management roles who are expected to

become leaders due to participation in leadership development (Gleeson, 2019). Additionally, a person's experiences will influence identity as a leader or confidence in leadership abilities (London & Sherman, 2021).

Defining the Middle Level

In discussing leadership development for occupants of middle-level organizational roles, it is important to discuss the relationship between these roles and their superiors and subordinates. The broad range of organizational roles listed as superior to the lower level and subordinate to the upper level have resulted in different interpretations of what is considered middle level. Huy (2001) considered the middle level as a status two steps below CEO and one step above laborers. DeChurch et al. (2010) identified the middle level as those who manage relationships with subordinate groups. Hierarchical organizational structures may result in multiple superior-subordinate relationships (Stech, 2008), with a large grouping of positions ranging from team leaders to senior managers (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). This level must integrate their individual knowledge and skills into translating an organization's vision into long-term and short-term plans (Conger & Fulmer, 2003; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004). Companies that actively listen to those at the middle level saw success with projects due to creativity and diversity of thought (Huy, 2001).

Relationships at the Middle Level

Due to their positioning between superiors and subordinates, the middle level can stabilize and adjust implementation of strategies based on variables unseen be either level (Huy, 2001). However, this positioning creates unique challenges for building and maintaining relationships on either side.

Relationship with Superiors

As upper levels are less specialized than lower levels (Burns, 1957), middle-level organizational roles serve as a bridge of communication between the upper and lower levels, thereby allowing others to act (Kuratko et al., 2005). Those at the middle level are key to the success of a system (Conger & Fulmer, 2003), adding value to an organization through informal relationships and connections with employees in conjunction with how they implement the directives from those in upper-level leadership (Huy, 2001). However, the relationship between the levels may be impacted by senior leaders who may view those at the middle level as self-serving, resistant to change, or negatively spinning the directives from the upper level (Kubica & White, 2007). Results from a study conducted by O'Toole and Pasternack (2000) of leaders of five global companies found that the senior leaders of these companies were not holding lower-level leaders accountable. Additionally, middle-level roles have been seen as the "concrete layer" in their hierarchy, where information from the upper level was filtered or blocked from the lower levels; this may influence the success or failure of organizational changes (Huy, 2001).

Relationship with Subordinates

Leadership has been primarily researched from the leader side of the leader-follower exchange (Malakyan, 2014). However, subordinates who employ followership behaviors in this exchange play a significant role in how leaders lead and manage change. Those at lower levels who are willing to participate in change processes are important to the organization (Huy, 2001). These may include those who provide opinions and constructive feedback, but do not have formal authority; and those who display emotional intelligence toward others who are involved in change. Subordinates are active participants in the hierarchy relationship and share common goals with leaders, each filling a particular role in overall success (Baker, 2007). Thus, Matthews

et al. (2021) assert that the traits and values of followers are important in understanding the constructs of leadership.

Pelz (1951) found a correlation between leader influence and follower acceptance. Labeled the Pelz Effect, the correlation denoted that influential leaders may be more widely accepted when they help followers achieve their goals, whereas non-influential leaders employing the same behavior were not received as well. Anderson et al. (1990) applied the Pelz Effect to areas of control in an organization: self-control, interpersonal control and organizational control. Results showed that a leader's influence also related to the follower's perception of control within the organization. A leader's perception of their own abilities is affected by followership behaviors, such as voicing concerns, solving problems or delegating the problem solving back to the leader (Carsten et al., 2017).

In collaborating with their subordinates, those in middle-level organizational roles were perceived to have credibility through understanding the needs of the employees and the operations of the organization and bringing about better insight (Huy, 2001). However, there is concern that there may be a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the middle level, causing subordinates to misjudge how tasks should be executed (Burns, 1957). There is also concern that occupants at the middle level may negatively impact the goals of the organization by dismissing employees' attempts to solve problems without their input or blocking decisions they perceived as threatening to their roles (Fenton-O'Creevy, 1996).

Developing the Middle Level

As illustrated, roles at the middle level are unique in that they function as a bridge between the upper and lower levels. Occupants of these roles must understand and be able to interpret the organization's goals, governance, policies and politics while building relationships

within the limitations of their own authority (Farrell, 2014). In a survey of top-level management at 20 companies to assess the extent of middle management in strategy and consensus building, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) determined that top and middle-level leaders acknowledge that those at the middle level make substantial contributions.

Leadership development for middle-level role occupants affects an organization in multiple ways. McGurk (2009) conducted two case studies involving middle-level role occupants in two different organizations. In the first case study, training participants acknowledged personal and career benefits, but no significant changes in their leadership or managerial behaviors or organizational outcomes were reported. In the second case study, there was a noted deficiency in knowledge transfer due to the organization's lack of support. However, participants noted enhanced self-awareness and more focus on developing their teams. In both case studies, participants appreciated the real-world scenarios more than the theory-based classroom training.

When a shift occurs to the middle levels in an organizational hierarchy, it is important to ensure necessary skills are acquired to succeed in these roles. Those at the middle level may have the skills to lead but need to be coached to use them differently (Fenton-O'Creevy, 1996). A study conducted by Chaimongkonrojna and Steane (2015) with participants from a six-month development program noted increased preparedness for leadership and changes in their leadership behaviors, and an understanding of differences between leadership and management. Additionally, participants indicated that while the program helped them understand effective leadership, they relied on their peers and colleagues when faced with handling issues on their own. Participants also noted that their individual goals and supervisor support influenced changed leadership behavior.

The program serving as the site for this study was developed following an action research study that was designed "to understand how to create the learning conditions for midlevel managers to develop the skillset and mindset necessary to transition from operational management to adaptive leadership" (Longo, 2017, p. 6). Senior leadership noted a need to address the deficit of middle-level role occupants who were able to move from an operational mindset to an adaptive mindset. The study used collaborative developmental action inquiry (CDAI) as its methodology, which allows the researcher to be an active participant in the research and include their own meaning making as data (Nicolaides & Dzubinski, 2015). The program from its onset included topics based on feedback from upper-level role occupants, as well as individual assessments, coaching and mentoring, and reflection assignments. Aside from developing the program structure, a key finding from the study was a shift in leadership mindset due to program components aimed at changing how participants understand and apply leadership. Participants noted changes from a more individual mindset, which Longo refers to as "me thinking" to a more collaborative mindset, referred to a "we thinking." Additionally, the study noted that participants' development was impacted by a combination of instructional, relational and reflective components.

Summary

Leadership is defined as a "process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2019, p. 43). Researchers have surmised that leaders are responsible for the culture and climate of an organization through their influence, intelligence, motivation, and ability to develop solutions. Leadership development may incorporate various components to develop effective programs, including elements of multiple adult learning theories. Elements of programs may determine overall effectiveness.

Leadership development programs are specifically designed to ensure organizations have agents who can usher in the changes needed for institutional success. As markets change, companies have moved from a hierarchical structure to a more team-based structure with managers having to take on the responsibility of leading these teams (Arnold et al., 2000). Leaders must also learn new skills and behaviors such as managing change, risk taking, team building and empowering others (Caldwell, 2003).

Occupants of middle level roles are unique as they have relationships with upper-level roles who may create the vision and policies, and the lower levels who are responsible for bringing the vision and goals to reality. The roles may employ leadership strategies and behaviors with their teams to interpret the overall vision and accomplish goals. Due to their significant role as a bridge, the organization must provide effective leadership development opportunities for these occupants to see an overall return on investment.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative interview study is to explore the perception of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles who have participated in a leadership development program at a university in Atlanta, Georgia. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles describe the impact of participation in a leadership development program?

2. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development based on personal, organizational, relational and training factors?

This chapter outlines the study design, selection of the participant sample, methods for assuring trustworthiness, the positionality of the researcher, methods for data collection and analysis, and the study's limitations and delimitations.

Study Design

Qualitative Research

This qualitative study was conducted to gain an understanding of the experiences of occupants of middle-level organizational roles prior to and after participation in a leadership development program. Qualitative research allows for understanding issues in detail and the context surrounding how participants perceive and address those issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A quantitative method such as a survey could gather statistical data; however, there is no account for a person's experiences. Qualitative research adds dimensions that cannot be provided solely

by analyzing numbers but can be used to support the understanding of other types of data (Pathak et al., 2013).

Research and evaluation are related, whether they are considered as a sequence, as overlapping, or as subsets of each other (Wanzer, 2020). While there are similarities, a noted difference is evaluation's focus on program quality and outcomes with improvement and decision-making as a goal (American Evaluation Association, 2014).

The intent of this research study was to gather insight into the perceptions of participants after participation in a leadership development program. It is important to note that while this study's subjects have participated in a structured program, this research study is not intended to serve as an evaluation of the program. The study seeks to add to the general knowledge base of leadership development, not focus on a program's criteria. Additionally, this study does not focus on program improvements, as no processes were observed. No prior criteria or benchmarks were examined.

The Qualitative Interview Study

In understanding how participants recount their experiences in leadership development, it was vital to use a methodology that will allow participants to express their voices fully. The qualitative interview was chosen as the research design for this study to allow participants to describe their realities and the subsequent interpretation of how those realities were constructed. Attributed to psychologist Carl Rogers (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004), qualitative interview studies use informally styled interviews to encourage participants to freely participate in the process. The interviewer is allowed to ask questions as starting points but gives participants autonomy to formulate their responses to describe a phenomenon (Roulston, 2010). Researchers are also allowed to have pertinent conversations with sensitivity to the experiences related by participants

(Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Additionally, interviews produce data that can be analyzed by different approaches (Bell et al., 2022). Due to the nature of qualitative interviews, data analysis will focus more on interpretation, bolstered by quotations and descriptions (Weiss, 1995). This approach, as opposed to phenomenology, was chosen to understand participants' perceptions of leadership development, not its essence or meaning.

As the assumption was that each participant would recount their unique experiences, a design was required that allowed questions to be relative to each interview (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). Employing a semi-structured interview design allowed for the gathering of inherently personal responses regarding experiences of a particular phenomenon (McIntosh & Morse, 2015) and the independent thoughts of each participant (Adams, 2015).

Setting for the Study

South Atlantic University (a pseudonym) is an academic institution in Atlanta, Georgia. Conversations between the university's leadership development department and senior leadership suggested a need to develop staff who were considered solid performers in their current roles and possessed the potential for the next leadership level. This resulted in a leadership development program that emerged as the result of an action research study (Longo, 2017). Program participants are nominated by their senior leadership and must be considered to have high potential for advancement. Program elements focused on three areas: the individual, through self-assessments and discussions around leadership styles; groups, through peer groups, mentoring and networking; and the organization, through department presentations and topics on diversity of workforce, decision making and change management.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

For interviews to be effective, identified participants must have experienced and are able to discuss a phenomenon (Roulston, 2010). Utilizing purposeful sampling allowed for the selection of individuals who could best offer the observations required for the study. Inclusion criteria was participation in a previous cohort of the leadership program and currently serving in a middle-level organizational role at the university. The most recent cohort was excluded, as participants may not have had enough time to incorporate acquired knowledge in their roles.

Those who met the qualifications were contacted by the program director by email to inform them of the opportunity to participate in a research study. This email included an invitation from the researcher and a link to the consent form (Appendix B). Those who completed the consent form were contacted to choose a date and time for the interview.

Sample Size

Qualitative research allows for use of a small sample size to collect extensive details about a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recommendations regarding the appropriate sample size for qualitative studies are varied. For example, a review of studies by Braun and Clarke (2019) recommended a range of 6-16 interviews, dependent on the nature of the research. A review of 23 empirical studies conducted by Hennink and Kaiser (2022) reported saturation, or no new codes emerging, reached between 9-17 interviews, with an average of 12-13 interviews. Due to the mixed research regarding appropriate sample size, it was determined that all who agreed to participate in the study would be heard and included.

Consideration of the mixed research regarding appropriate sample size and potential attrition in the pool of participants prompted a different approach. As an alternative to saturation, Malterud et al. (2016) introduced information power as a sampling concept, whereby the sample

size is predicated on certain areas including the study's goal, the sample's specificity, and the quality of the discussion between researchers and participants. Information power allows the interviewer to engage in insightful dialogue with a small sample size of participants who meet the criteria that are specific to the study. The concept highlights that smaller samples can produce rich and insightful data (LaDonna et al., 2021). The small sample size did not negate the information power provided through the quality of the discussion between researchers and participants.

Trust Between Researcher and Participants

There is a fine line between building enough trust to ask probing questions, while maintaining enough distance to show respect (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). This is particularly true if the researcher may be considered an outsider (Emmel et al., 2007). To develop a level of trust with participants during the recruitment and interview process, I was respectful of their time, reiterated the confidential nature of the conversations throughout the interviews, and asked clarifying questions to ensure their thoughts and beliefs were accurately reflected in the data.

As the study participants are members of small cohorts and are employed at the location of the study, safety was paramount. Participants were provided a form to complete (Appendix B) acknowledging informed consent prior to choosing an interview date.

To make participation easier, each participant received a calendar meeting invite after choosing their interview date; however, the invite did not specify the purpose of the meeting in case their calendar was shared with others. Each participant also received a unique videoconferencing link, which reduced the possibility of additional attendees and allowed participants to choose a space where they felt comfortable. Participants were also provided with

an opportunity to choose their pseudonym for the study, which allowed for participants to see themselves represented in a vital part of the research (Allen & Wiles, 2015).

Participants were also informed they would not receive any direct benefits for participation. Additionally, participants were made aware they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their data would be immediately destroyed. An additional safety mechanism was the review and approval of these methods by the UGA Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were provided contact information for the UGA IRB should they have questions about their participation. All electronic consent information, interview recordings and transcriptions were strictly maintained by the researcher and were destroyed following analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the primary sources of data for this study, which allowed for expansion and reflection by the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Collecting data from semi-structured interviews relies on the participant's willingness to discuss their views and the interviewer's ability to be flexible (Roulston, 2010). Interviews were conducted via video conferencing, which was used to increase engagement as it allowed for those with limited availability to participate (Janghorban et al., 2014) in a space where they felt comfortable. Participants were asked to be in a space with minimal interruption. Interviews were scheduled for no more than 60 minutes. Participants were reminded of confidentiality and consent protocols and were made aware they could ask questions if they were unsure about any aspect of the interview.

Aligning interview questions with research questions ensures the questions are purposeful while allowing participants to share their experiences (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The interview

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protocol was developed to understand participants' preconceptions of leadership styles and leadership development, while also associating the conceptual framework that focused on the personal, organizational, relational, and training factors affecting the perception of leadership development. Several iterations of the interview protocol were reviewed for congruency with the research questions and promotion of a rich dialogue with the respondents prior to approval. While the questions were open-ended, prompts were added in case more information was needed and follow-up questions were asked for clarity.

Interviews were completed in a 30-day period. Throughout the interview process, participants were able to retract any statements that were concerning or clarify any statements that may have been ambiguous. This helped to maintain the participant's anonymity while allowing them to actively participate in the research process. The researcher's goal of accuracy was also maintained through this process.

Data Analysis

There are a variety of coding methods, each dependent on the nature of the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inductive coding, as opposed to a priori coding, was chosen to allow for themes and codes to emerge from the data. While there were no codes developed prior to analysis, it was assumed key concepts regarding leadership development would surface. This theoretical sensitivity, or the ability to extract data from participants' responses and construct meaning (Mills et al., 2006), was based on previous knowledge of and experience with leadership development. To aid in subsequent analysis, notes were taken during the interview process. Notes themselves can provide rich data and may aid in subsequent analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

Data analysis began during the interviews, as initial keywords were highlighted in the researcher notes. In vivo coding and researcher notes were used to extract codes. In vivo coding as a qualitative data analysis method allows for codes to be created through using the participant's own words (Saldaña, 2021). Labeling was predicated on the interview protocol and key concepts. NVivo 14 coding software and manual coding were used to identify 149 initial codes, including those that were similar in theme but not necessarily similar in vocabulary. Following in vivo coding, the subsequent data were grouped into themes through pattern coding. Pattern coding is appropriate for thematic analysis, as it allows for removal of any irrelevant themes (Saldaña, 2021). Patterns were denoted if codes were related by concept. Nine themes emerged from the coding process. These themes were subsequent grouped according to the personal, organizational, relational and training factors outlined in the conceptual framework for this study. Table 6 shows an example of the coding process.

Table 6

Example of the Coding Process

Process	Example (Participant – Paul)
Researcher notes during interview	"Implementation" - More frank and open discussions - Less misunderstanding
Transcripts uploaded into NVivo 14 software and reviewed	Excerpt: "Well, I think that we implemented more frank and open discussions about apparent conflicts … instead of, like, letting confusion and or misunderstanding and, or, like conflict enter in the background, like having more frank conversations …"
Researcher notes and transcripts manually reviewed for codes	Open discussion Confusion Misunderstandings Conflict
Codes reviewed for patterns, then themes	Pattern: Communication with team Theme: Team Communication

Trustworthiness of the Research

For there to be validity in the interpretation of the data, there must be accurate representation of the data in the findings (Morse, 2015). Findings must be reflective of others who have participated in the phenomenon being studied (Klenke, 2016). Quality and validity methods used were an approved interview protocol and acknowledgement of researcher bias.

Use of a Refined Interview Protocol

The goal of an interview is to focus the conversation on definitive descriptions of the participant's experience (deMarrais & Tisdale, 2002). As mentioned, the interview protocol was developed to align with the research questions and conceptual framework of the study, and allow

for more in-depth conversation with study participants. Several revisions of the protocol were made to ensure alignment with the study's purpose and research questions. Following UGA IRB approval, two pilot interviews were conducted to pre-test the protocol. Pilot participants occupy middle-level organizational roles at their respective employers and have participated in leadership development programs but were not employed by the university. The interviews were conducted, followed by review of the question and interview procedures with the interviewee. Assessing the interview protocol with someone who mirrors the study participant group allows the researcher to understand if any modifications are needed before beginning the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Pilot interviews may also aid researchers in being adaptable and responsive in interviewing, reducing issues or errors (Ismail et al., 2017). The feedback resulted in no changes to the interview protocol, indicating the protocol was congruent with the research questions of this study.

Acknowledgement of Research Bias

The axiological assumption of qualitative research results in admittance of a researcher's values and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflexivity is the acknowledgment of how a researcher's views may directly or indirectly influence study design and data interpretation (Holmes, 2020). Thus, a researcher's positionality influences research, including procedures, outcomes, and results.

My previous participation in leadership development programs and serving in middle-level roles in organizations played a role in the development of the interview protocol and methodology for this study. To acknowledge researcher subjectivity and reduce bias, data and findings were shared with non-affiliated reviewers who provided feedback as to where researcher bias may be perceived. External review aids in validating the accuracy of the data (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). However, as researchers are a key part of the process and are reflected in the final document, it is not possible for a study to be devoid of any bias (Galdas, 2017).

Another important step was to acknowledge potential sources of bias by describing my positionality. While I made every effort to avoid bias in my analysis and writing, the data analysis and findings reported may be influenced by my experiences as a participant in or developer of leadership development programming. I also acknowledge my prior observations may not align with the thoughts and experiences of the study participants. My positionality is outlined next.

Positionality of the Researcher

I had been an "unofficial" student of leadership for years before participating in leadership programs. I observed those who were characterized as leaders: their posture, speech, mannerisms, and interactions with others. I would make mental notes of the positives (ability to inspire or influence) and negatives (lack of vision, unable to inspire to action). I spent more than 15 years of my professional career in communications in human resources, where the hierarchy of the organization is clearly defined. I have conducted interviews and observations of various units and departments, noting the relationship between those at various organizational levels—from the commissioner, general manager or president to the mailroom clerk or custodian.

I have also attended leadership development training and workshops, including courses provided by the department delivering the program. Programs focused on developing leadership competencies, understanding how to apply those competencies, and how to work within the hierarchy; however, the programs in which I participated did not focus on crafting a vision or mission, developing strategic plans, and influencing followers. The setting for the study and the participant selection process were selected due to my knowledge of the program.

I am a member of multiple organizations with community service components. While not specifically considered community-based, each organization needed leaders who were able to collaborate with community partners while inspiring members to do service for the greater good. I observed how these leaders implemented their vision or managed pushback from the membership. My own leadership journey included responsibilities of interpreting the vision and goals of upper-level leaders, while collaborating with members to develop plans to achieve these goals. My middle-level organizational role was to bridge the gap between these two groups, employing leadership capabilities (inspire to action) and management capabilities (plans for execution).

Years of observation combined with my experiences in leading and managing from the middle led to this belief: those who move organizations forward are those who are capable of both inspiring and managing the masses. Because this is crucial in an organization, leadership development is pivotal for those in roles that serve as the bridge between the various levels. It is this belief that became the catalyst for this study.

Summary

A qualitative interview study design was used to enable participants to share their experiences. Study participants were solicited from previous members of a university's cohort-based leadership development program who successfully completed the program. Participants were made aware of informed consent and confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an approved interview protocol. Data analysis was conducted via in vivo coding and manual coding to extract codes from participants' own words, followed by pattern coding to determine emergent themes. Efforts to ensure trustworthiness of the research were made by use of an approved interview protocol and acknowledgement of researcher bias. Participants were

allowed to choose a pseudonym or have one provided for them. All electronic consent information, interview recordings and transcriptions were strictly maintained and subsequently destroyed after analysis.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the perception of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles who have participated in a leadership development program at a university in Atlanta, Georgia. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles describe the impact of participation in a leadership development program?

2. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development based on personal, organizational, relational and training factors?

This chapter presents the findings of the study, including participant profiles and synthesis of emergent themes as related to the research questions and the conceptual framework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for expansion and reflection by the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and allowed the researcher to engage in a dialogue with the participant to understand his or her point of view. Participants were reminded of confidentiality and consent protocols and could ask questions if they were unsure about any aspect of the interview. Participants were also reminded of the ability to revoke their participation in the study.

While one hour was allotted for each interview, the average interview length was 24 minutes, with 19 minutes as the shortest and nearly 40 minutes as the longest. The participants were afforded an opportunity to provide as much information as they were comfortable sharing;

therefore, there was no attempt to prolong the interviews. Transcripts and researcher notes were reviewed to ensure quotes were captured accurately.

<div align="center">**Participant Demographics and Profiles**</div>

The study sample included seven people who worked at South Atlantic University (a pseudonym) at the time of the study and participated in a previous cohort of a leadership development program. Eight participants responded to the survey invitation; however, one was unable to complete the interview process for personal reasons. Table 7 outlines the participant demographics, which were acquired through a survey at the time of the interview.

Table 7

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Racial Identity	Years in Current Role
Atreyu	M	40	White/Caucasian	Between 5-10 years
Elizabeth	F	43	White/Caucasian	Less than 5 years
Emma	F	50	White/Caucasian	More than 10 years
Eve	F	44	Black/African American	Less than 5 years
Olivia	F	47	White/Caucasian	More than 10 years
Paul	M	52	White/Caucasian	Less than 5 years
Veronica	F	42	Black/African American	Between 5-10 years

Participants were of varying ages, racial identities and length of time in their current leadership roles. The average age of participants was 45.4. Minorities comprised 28.6 percent of the interviewees. These demographics are similar to statistics of management roles reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) which reported an average age of management-role occupants of 46.5 and a minority composition of 31.1 percent of these roles. However, whereas women comprised 45.7 percent of management roles, they comprised 71.4 percent of participants for this study.

While demographics are necessary to show how data are representative of the group under study, they only provide a small part of the story. As qualitative research allows for understanding a person's experiences, it is helpful to know what shaped those experiences.

Atreyu

Atreyu, 40, identifies as a White/Caucasian male who has been in his current leadership role for more than five years. He was the first interview, which means he was the first to self-pseudonym. He chose a character from the movie "The NeverEnding Story." I have never seen the movie, so I unfortunately missed an opportunity to ask about its significance to him. Atreyu was straightforward in the interview, which is why his was the shortest. He discussed the value he found in a previous leadership development program at the university and how it prompted his decision to join another program. He believed leadership and management are two distinct concepts: management is administrative, while leadership is transformational, inspiring and allows for others to do their best work.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth, 43, identifies as a White/Caucasian female and has been in her current leadership role less than five years. She participated in the program to show her supervisors she was interested in further development and career opportunities. Leadership development programming helped her increase her understanding of the concept of servant leadership and she is now more cognizant of how to work with her team: "I don't want to ask people to work harder than I myself am working and I want to have empathy for where people are." One thing that resonated about Elizabeth was she acknowledged she "brainstorms out loud," which may be seen as directives since she says she speaks authoritatively sometimes.

Emma

Emma, 50, identifies as a White/Caucasian female who has been in her current leadership role for more than 10 years. While she has facilitated leadership development programs in the past, she was also trying to find ways to move up in the leadership hierarchy. As a member of a protected class, Emma says she is always thinking about identity and power. She took issue with the discussion around regarding diversity, equity and inclusion, recounting that there were those who "stumbled over stuff or just made assumptions." She says these conversations should be in the forefront now more than ever. Emma was quite lively and was excited to share her story; her interview was the longest at 41 minutes.

Eve

Eve, 44, identifies as a Black/African American female and has been in current leadership role for less than five years. She considers herself an experiential learner and enjoyed the collaborative learning atmosphere with the program facilitators and peers. She thinks the higher ones goes up the leadership ladder, the less one has to know. She appreciated understanding it was okay to not have all the answers, as, "so, I had to learn to not be the answer giver, but more of a question asker." Eve was very deliberate and direct in her answers, which may speak to her compartmentalizing of tasks and her intentionality toward delegation.

Olivia

Olivia, 47, identifies as a White/Caucasian female and has been in her current leadership role for more than 10 years. Her responsibilities for leading her large team led to a philosophy of "just doing the best she could every day." Leadership development helped her better understand how to manage her team in crisis situations, noting it was important to have a calm but direct approach. There was a noted shift in her tone when she discussed the actions of a previous

supervisor after her participation in the program, as she felt unsupported when wanting to implement changes.

Paul

Paul, 52, identifies as a White/Caucasian male and has been in his current leadership role less than five years. He had been nominated for the program multiple times prior to participation. He is intentional about his business relationships and encourages his team to be intentional as well. He believes one is always curating a professional image through relationships and networking. Paul was also straightforward in the interview but was more open when discussing his family and how did not want participation in the program to have a negative impact on his family life. He also admitted to not focusing necessarily on goals, but rather focused on working on his weaknesses.

Veronica

Veronica, 42, identifies as a Black/African American female and has been in her current leadership role for more than five years. She noted that while her leadership philosophy has evolved, it's still "a little all over the place." A self-proclaimed introvert, she saw very few examples of introverted leaders, particularly who were people of color. This caused her to have an identity crisis, prompting her to try to change herself to fit a certain mold. However, Veronica was visibly excited when she spoke about how she was now on an "incredible adventure of learning and exploration" and how she now seeks out more learning opportunities.

Providing a glimpse into the thoughts of the study participants offers more context regarding the perceived impact of leadership development, as asked in RQ1.

RQ1: How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles describe the impact of participation in a leadership development program?

While RQ1 focuses on the impact of leadership development, the interview protocol for this study purposely avoided asking about impact directly. It was assumed that participants would illustrate the impact through their answers to questions about program topics that resonated with them and applicability of the knowledge received, including any potential barriers. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed participants a wide berth to recount their experiences.

However, as the word "impact" denotes possibility of change, it was important to understand participants' prior leadership styles and preconceptions regarding leadership development. A decision was made to demonstrate perceived impact using the participants' own words, threaded through the conceptual framework that suggests personal, organizational, relational and training factors will influence the participants' perceptions. The premise was that the ability to apply elements of the program, personally or professionally, would influence the perception of impact.

Expectations of the Leadership Development Program

Participants were directly asked about their expectations of the program. This proved to be a question of interpretation of the word "expectation." While some participants focused on the expectation of impact, others focused on the offerings themselves. For example, Atreyu admitted he had low expectations about the benefits of the program, but said the program provided more than he anticipated.

I didn't actually think I was going to get a whole lot out of it other than something that I could add to my resume and would help me to move towards a managerial role. I'm happy to say that I was wrong about that.

Others focused on topics or behaviors they expected to see. Eve expected notetaking, learning and memorization. Olivia expected classwork and networking with others at her level in the organization. Veronica also expected to network with peers from other departments. Paul expected the program to reinforce skills he developed from other programs. Respondents' thoughts regarding the program's offerings aligned with the research, which indicates an expectation of gaining skills and knowledge is typically important to program participants (Gentry et al., 2013).

Study data show varying expectations of leadership development, which underscores the individual nature in how participants may view its impact or how knowledge may be used. Leadership development programs that do not match expectations of participants may lead to negative experiences (Kjellström et al., 2020). Understanding both the purpose of the program and how it will address the needs of the participants are important to meeting those expectations (Leroy et al., 2023). An assumption of this study was that personal factors affect how participants perceive leadership development, and that it was expected that the program would have personal or professional impact. Atreyu's comment challenged this assumption, in that he went in with low expectations, thinking he would get very little out of the program. One could surmise that the program's impact, for him at least, was a change in thought regarding the benefits of the program.

Leadership Style Prior to Leadership Development

Participants were also asked about their leadership philosophy prior to their participation. While many said they had no set philosophy, three participants reported an initial one-way or top-down philosophy of leadership. Table 8 summarizes their answers.

Table 8

Participant Leadership Styles Prior to Leadership Development

Participant	Self-reported Leadership Style Prior to Leadership Development
Atreyu	"… a leader is one that pushes their agenda down the organization."
Elizabeth	"I don't know that I had a very well developed leadership philosophy before that, but just knowing that like … I want to serve the people around me."
Emma	"Honestly, I didn't have a leadership philosophy before I went there …"
Eve	"My behavior was more of, you know, I'm the leader of this group, and I'm here to make sure that everything gets done right."
Olivia	"My approach was do the best I can every day."
Paul	"Well, I think as a young leader … it's probably more, you know my way, or the highway type leader."
Veronica	"I don't know that I had a really firm handle on what leadership was at that time."

The mix of responses underscores how individuals view leadership through different lenses, as research presented in Chapter 2 suggests. For example, Veronica, who acknowledged she felt "imposter syndrome," thought leaders possessed certain characteristics and that she should possess those traits: "I had this caricature that I was trying to turn myself into, pushing myself into before I had joined this program."

For Eve, one of the readings assigned in the program helped her understand behaviors she should employ as a leader:

As you go up the leadership ladder, the less you have to know because you rely on the people below you to have the answers. You just need to be able to shepherd and guide and develop them so that they can have the answers, and so you allow them the opportunity in the space to have the answers, and you just be able to draw out of them.

Veronica and Eve's examples show how one's own leadership behaviors may play a role in how they assess leadership. The perception of oneself as a leader may be based on factors such as one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) or their personal values and experiences (Solà et al., 2016). Additional perceptions of one's leadership may be constructed through interactions with others, which may influence team performance and outcomes (Chiu et al., 2017).

For Emma, observing leadership behaviors of those in upper-level roles prompted her decision to refrain from moving to senior leadership:

I used to want to be, like, a dean or a Provost or a President, like something at senior leadership, and for me, in the decades that I've worked at our institution watching, I have no desire to be senior leadership now, because I feel like the kind of compromises you have to make … watching people that I knew before they got into senior leadership, and like kind of how they changed and what it did to them. And yeah, it's not for me.

Development of one's personal leadership style may impact goal development with and the job performance of subordinates (Bouckenooghe et al., 2015). These responses suggest that participants may emulate or reject leadership styles and behaviors of those they consider to be leaders. Literature indicates construction of a personal leadership philosophy occurs through observation and modeling of behavior (Badrinarayanan et al., 2019).

Changes in Mindset or Behavior

While someone may not have a clear definition for leadership, they may still observe and mimic another's leadership behaviors. As leadership looks different to everyone, concepts presented in leadership development will resonate differently with each participant. Table 9 highlights one change participants saw in their mindset or behavior.

Table 9

Self-reported Change in Participant Mindset or Behavior

Participant	Self-reported Change in Mindset or Behavior
Atreyu	"Having gone through some case studies and practice exercises prepared me for having some really difficult conversations and being able to manage my own emotions and expectations."
Elizabeth	"Since the leadership development programs that I've participated in, as well as like just a lot more time having more leadership experience, I think now I would focus a bit more on also helping the people that I'm leading think through what their goals are and what their plans are …"
Emma	"A skill that I really, like, strengthened or flexed in that group program was, like, active listening … I'm so used to, like, running things, or like leading things, that it really forced me to try and … listen to other people."
Eve	"One of the key takeaways that really, I guess, changed my leadership perspective—I left feeling like my role as a leader was to encourage and facilitate the development of my team so that they can get the work done, instead of focusing on the work."
Olivia	"I think the course taught me to kind of slow it down a little bit, understanding that time dedicated to the people that I was supervising, instead of always just giving directives, was an integral part of developing a team oriented philosophy beyond just me …"
Paul	"One of the feedback [items] that I did get was, like, in meetings, like interrupting people or talking over them. So, I made a point to not only not do that, but also not let anyone else do that to someone else …"
Veronica	"It helped me to be able to communicate more effectively when and where I could, and it helped me to also be patient with myself and with others ..."

Internal reflection may allow those who were able to articulate their leadership style to see an impact through reinforced or changed behaviors, while those who were unable to articulate a particular style may develop a formal one or become aware of theirs as they progress through the program. Additionally, understanding of leadership styles and behaviors may cause participants to see themselves, their surroundings, and their future aspirations in a different light. Understanding the participants' expectations of leadership development and their preconception about their leadership philosophy relates their experiences as to how leadership development caused a shift in mindset and behaviors.

Though all components of the program did not resonate with everyone, all respondents noted a change in some behavior after leadership development. This paralleled one of the findings of the Longo (2017) study that developed the program under study. Further impact of their participation, such as any additional changes in thoughts, behaviors, or actions, is shown through the participants' own words and categorized by themes identified for RQ2.***RQ2: How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development based on personal, organizational, relational and training factors?***

Emergent Themes

Categorization of emergent themes occurred through the conceptual framework which focused on four factors: personal factors, organizational factors, relational factors, and training factors. Table 10 summarizes the key themes that emerged after the coding process.

Table 10

Themes and Findings

Theme	Findings
Personal Factors	
Skill Development	Participants seek to develop, increase and reinforce leadership skills
Personal Growth	Assessments, either self or peer, allow for understanding of one's own leadership styles and behaviors and those of others
Career Growth	Participation signals willingness to serve in higher roles
Organizational Factors	
Team Support and Development	Participants consider development opportunities for subordinates
Team Communication	Tools help participants manage communication with team members
Relational Factors	
Mentoring	Mentors provide support during and after the program if knowledgeable about the participant or program
Networking and Peer Relationships	Participants want to broaden networks among peers and superiors, with opportunities for learning, accountability and connection
Training Factors	
Topic Applicability	Certain topics are more relevant or beneficial than others
Concept Review	Review of previous concepts during and after is beneficial

Personal Factors

Theme 1: Skill Development

Leadership development participants use these programs to gain new skills or reinforce or

increase the skills they already possess. Programs often focus on competencies which may

incorporate one's knowledge, abilities and experiences (Gentry et al., 2013), by providing various learning opportunities such as experiential, problem-based and project-based learning opportunities (Allen et al., 2021). Yet, while organizations invest in leadership development to enhance the organization's position, literature indicates employees have their own motivations for participating in programs (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019).

Participants mentioned skill development as motivation for participation. Emma thought the program would help her gain and highlight different skills, noting she had facilitated discussion groups but "had no, like, leadership training per se … I mean, you don't take a class in leadership in graduate school." Eve wanted to increase her leadership knowledge level, as she had just begun leading a medium-sized team. Paul hoped to have prior leadership development reinforced and improve various skills, seeking "a well-rounded suite of skills that executives need." Veronica wanted to improve her ability to navigate leadership challenges and develop confidence in "being able to speak with people that were at least one or two levels above me …" Participants also saw this program as an opportunity to build knowledge or reinforce prior leadership knowledge and skills through the program's offerings, while others used the program as a catalyst for continued learning. Atreyu saw value in previous courses that led him to take this program, noting that it "is something that led me to want to continue on in the second series and start learning … and really understanding, looking at things from different perspectives."

For Eve, an expectation of prior knowledge led to a positive experience, as it allowed all involved to be participatory in the educational programming:

> The other thing that was very helpful was that they expected us to come in with previous knowledge, so, you know, we weren't just a student. We were also kind of co-facilitators with them, you know. So, bringing our previous knowledge, helping us learn from each

other - that was also a very valuable part of the process, was you could learn from your

peers. The facilitator didn't necessarily always have the answers. It was more about

collaborating and learning from each other.

Others were inspired to learn more after the program. Veronica's participation sparked

continued learning about leadership strategies:

I gained so much insight. It really started me off on this incredible adventure of learning

and exploration … every month, I'm reading a new book about leadership and about how

organizations function. I'm always taking some sort of leadership course … so it really

inspired me to be a more reflective leader.

Leadership development should increase the skill levels of employees for the benefit of

the organization. Effective programming for the middle level may take a participant's previous

experiences into account, including prior knowledge and skills (Day et al., 2021). Study data

regarding personal factors that may impact the perception of leadership development support this

claim. Participant data support the idea that how participants construct knowledge is integral to

organizational outcomes (Bialek & Hagen, 2021).

Theme 2: Personal Growth

Participants may also view leadership development programs as a means for personal

development, benefiting from components focused on self-assessment and personal growth

(Yemiscigil et al., 2023). Assessments such as 360-degree feedback and the Birkman Method^{TM}

allowed for study participants to understand their personal and teams' leadership styles and how

those styles effect outcomes. For Eve, the leadership assessments were, "very eye-opening in

terms of, you know, how I may perceive myself versus how others may perceive me and how to

go ahead and close that gap." For Paul, the assessment helped him focus on how he was

interacting with his staff, allowing him to change one of his behaviors. Veronica said the assessments helped to identify how to respond when stressed: "… so that awareness was a really key piece for me and for many others in the cohort, I believe."

Additionally, some participants were inspired to change their leadership approach. For Olivia the recurring theme of "get comfortable with being uncomfortable" continued to resonate with her after participation: "That reminder of, you know, just because I don't feel comfortable doing it doesn't mean that I shouldn't do it. It's actually a signal that I should definitely pursue that in developing myself as a leader."

While the purpose of leadership development is to increase the skill level in an organization, successful programs may also provide opportunities for personal development. Understanding personal and team leadership styles and behaviors, as well as how to manage change and tackle potentially difficult situations, may result in enhanced self-evaluation and accountability (Bialek & Hagen, 2021).

Theme 3: Career Growth

Study data indicate participants thought leadership development would help them move higher in their career growth, through building their resumé or showing their interest in development opportunities or higher leadership positions. Atreyu thought participation would be "something that I could add to my resumé and would help me to move towards a managerial role." Elizabeth said participation was a way to "signal to my supervisors that I was interested in further development and further career opportunities." Emma wanted to find out "how could I find jobs that would put me in line for more leadership positions."

Study data indicate leadership development participants expect organizations to provide skills that will aid in career development and advancement. Leadership development participants

may use these programs to display their leadership capacity to superiors (Jiang et al., 2021).

Programming should include content that participants may find beneficial at crucial points in

their career trajectory (Clarke & Matthews, 2020), with an understanding of how participants

plan to or are expected to apply the knowledge (Leroy et al., 2023).

Synopsis. Organizations are systems that rely on individuals to fulfill their roles, but

those individuals have needs. Participants were asked about their motivation for and expectations

of the program to gain insight into what makes leadership development important to them.

Attrition may result in significant loss of knowledge and skills for the organization. The data

suggests leadership development programs must incorporate elements that are important to them,

even if they may not coincide directly with the vision and goals of the organization or may not be

retained in the organization. Participants are expected to use what they gain from the program in

the workplace; however, they also expect opportunities that will help them advance in their

careers, internally or externally.

Organizational Factors

The conceptual framework for this study assumes the perception of leadership

development is influenced by how an organization operates. An organization may influence

decisions at outcomes through its handling of current issues and potential changes (Farrell,

2018). Additionally, literature suggests that leaders who feel supported by their organization are

more likely to be supportive of subordinates (Eisenberger et al., 2020). Following leadership

development, participants developed more of a team approach and focused on encouraging the

professional development of their team members.

Theme 4: Team Support and Development

Just as leadership development programs are expected to provide growth opportunities for leaders, leaders are expected to provide growth opportunities for their teams to influence organizational outcomes (Koziol-Nadolna, 2020). One aspect of the program specifically focused on team management through discussions on emotional intelligence and managing diverse teams.

Most study participants indicated leadership development affected how they supported and developed their teams. The program helped Elizabeth "think through development plans, and sort of helping my team and people who report to me think about like what their professional goals are and how they would develop." Paul focused on being transparent with his team, noting that, "I want to develop you and make you successful. That makes me successful." Emma sought to develop others through helping them discover their interests: "Oftentimes it's just kind of like asking people questions about where they want to go and what they want to do." Eve finished the program with a different mindset about her role as a leader to her team:

> I left feeling like my role as a leader … was to encourage, develop, and support the team as people, as human beings, right? And as I do that, then the work will get done. So, it kind of shifted my perspective.

The program's session on change management helped Veronica shift to a more team-focused mindset during crucial changes in her office:

> We had some great folks … Who are creative, and you know, very much thoughtful about the process, who could help me to think about what we needed to do to look ahead and forward, what positions needed to be on our team in order to grow … Bringing them

on board and helping to problem solve was probably one of the best things that could

have happened.

Veronica's shift showed her support for her staff; however, a lack of superior support for

participation or knowledge transfer is an issue for leadership development participants. In a

contrasting case, Olivia noted that her supervisor was supportive of her participating in

leadership development, yet was not supportive of the ideas she wanted to implement that would

have developed her team:

> I don't know that in the long term the changes … that I wanted to implement were
>
> supported, whether it being because there was a lack of understanding or time, resources,
>
> etc. It also became very apparent that my supervisor at the time was not probably the best
>
> leader either.

> Study data support the idea that leaders who provide development opportunities for their

teams may influence team members' perception of the leader and the organization. In turn, team

members may feel empowered to offer solutions to challenges while influencing others to

participate in strategy execution (Bastardoz & Van Vugt, 2019). Team members who have high

expectations of themselves may view expectations set by their leadership in a more positive

light, which in turn may influence greater effort to meet those expectations (Veestraeten et al.,

2020). Conversely, an unsupportive environment may result in a lack of motivation to generate

outcomes (Pitichat et al., 2017).

Theme 5: Team Communication

Communication is essential to team performance and outcomes (Marlow et al., 2018).

Participants recalled the program's focus on communication and the impact it had on their

interaction with their teams. Through participation in the leadership development program,

participants were able to better understand their personal communication style and the communication style of their team members.

As noted earlier, some study participants had a more top-down, authority driven leadership philosophy prior to their participation in the program. For Elizabeth, leadership development helped her understand her communication style and work to communicate better with her staff:

> As I have grown in leadership, though one of the things I've realized is that sometimes when I'm brainstorming, my team may take that as like, oh, Elizabeth is telling us what to do, and giving us a directive … I can speak authoritatively sometimes. And if I want to create a space for people to give feedback and give ideas, I have to really work hard and work intentionally to create those spaces.

Olivia's issue was developing a way to communicate with her large team. The program offered ideas on creating communication touch points, which helped her have regular interactions: "I would go to where they are working in in the field, so to speak, and then just kind of have a smaller touch base kind of conversation."

For some of the participants, a specific portion of the leadership development program on how to have challenging conversations proved helpful. Atreyu, who described the program section focused on communication as "a difficult, difficult class," understood how having uncomfortable conversations were necessary for employee growth and development:

> I was able to … sit down and have those difficult conversations with, with two of my staff. And the interesting part is very similar conversations, two completely different results. So, one of them has just done amazing and has really kind of taken that conversation and grown from it … The other staff member actually ended up leaving and,

hopefully, you know, in a way that was better for that individual. So, I think that (the conversation) … though it led to two different outcomes, actually led to good outcomes for those individuals in both cases.

Eve, who describes herself as conflict averse, said communication was an area where she needed to grow and had difficulty implementing strategies at first:

I necessarily didn't want to do that right away … Just anticipating a lot of negative reactions prevented me from engaging in the conversations right away, but eventually mustered up the call, the comfort, the courage to do it … It was uncomfortable, but in the end, it created more of a sense of shared understanding between me and my employee, you know, and expectations moving forward so getting past that discomfort for the better outcome.

Following leadership development, Paul took the opportunity to implement more open discussions with his team to prevent or reduce chances of conflict:

I think that we implemented more frank and open discussions about apparent conflicts, or, you know, difference in opinion … instead of, like letting confusion and/or misunderstanding and/or like conflict enter in the background … And so we had, I think, after the leadership program, I made, kind of doubled down on the inspiring conversations to make sure everyone was understanding where my, my point of view is nothing, but how do we make you successful … definitely more discussion, more open communication.

For other program participants, the focus on communication proved vital in workplace situations. Veronica was able to better communicate with her team during critical office changes:

We were going through so much change at that point in time I received so many tactical

and practical themes from that particular point … It helped me to communicate as best I

could, given some of the limitations that we were facing at the time. If I had not known

that beforehand, I may have thrown my hands up and just said, well, you know, they're

not getting it. I just need to move on to something else or somebody else that can just do

this for me really quickly. But I think that, knowing that along with knowing some of the

working styles, helped me to better manage some of these changes …

Study data support the literature by illustrating how leadership development participants

understood the need for quality communication with their team members, even if that

communication was difficult. Literature indicates that a leader's communication style affects

team member engagement (Othman et al., 2017). How leaders communicate with their teams can

influence trust levels, relationship strength and organizational culture (Yue et al., 2021).

Synopsis. While organizations are comprised of individuals, one cannot overlook the

importance of how these individuals function as teams. The data highlight how occupants of

middle-level roles view the importance of their teams' development and well-being, while being

mindful of the needs of the organization. Participants felt a responsibility to ensure their teams

grow in their skills and their roles but were reminded that these efforts may come with difficulty.

Skills related to team management and communication were referenced by multiple respondents

when asked about difficulty in implementing parts of the program.

Relational Factors

An aspect of the leadership development program focused on building relationships

through collaboration, networks and partnerships. The conceptual framework notes relational

factors influencing the perception of leadership development, with an assumption that middle-

level role occupants would see an impact in their relationships with the superiors and subordinates. Literature suggests these relationships are integral to organizational success (Huy, 2001). However, it is interesting to note that most participants did not discuss their relationships with superiors. Rather, participants focused on team dynamics, as outlined in themes six and seven, and their relationships with their mentors and cohort and peers.

Theme 6: Mentoring

Mentoring as a part of leadership development has been shown to have a positive impact on participants and organizations (Murrell et al., 2021). Mentors were provided to participants, which was considered an integral relationship-building part of the program. Elizabeth was appreciative of the mentoring during and after the program. Olivia found value in the mentoring, as it provided an opportunity to learn more about her workplace:

> They paired us with … somebody that was higher up in leadership in the organization. And that was also very important, because I was able to kind of understand a different area of the university, and I still stay in touch with my mentor many years later.

> However, for a few participants, mentoring in the program proved challenging. Atreyu did not develop a connection with his mentor and believes having the ability to choose his mentor would have been better: "I don't think the structure was particularly helpful, and the mentor … wasn't in an area that really complemented my own." Veronica's experience with her mentor was mixed: "I leaned a lot on her and in some ways, she was helpful … but she's one person and she's very busy … I don't know how helpful she could have been because she didn't understand all of the nuances …"

Paul considered mentoring as an accountability tool, which aligns with his thoughts about how business relationships impact business:

I think if you had a buddy and part of the program was to report to your buddy about

things that you're trying to implement ... or a mentor specifically with knowledge about

the content of the program, that might have been a good tool, to kind of report to your

mentor just to, you know, make sure that you're reviewing the course content … that

would have been helpful.

Theme 7: Networks and Peer Relationships

Building relationships, through networking or working with peers, is an important piece

in leadership development as it allows for participants to learn not only how to identify and solve

problems, but also who can aid in problem solving (Day, 2000). The program supported this

through a cohort learning model and a session on network development.

Literature indicates social networking can be an important piece of leadership

development, as it allows for the development of relationships that may be influential in the

future (Oberer & Erkollar, 2018) and knowledge exchange and assistance with upper-level role

occupants and peers (Azorín et al., 2019). Networking among peers may also promote a

commitment to each other's achievement and development of a cross-functional, collaborative

approach to goal achievement (Bialek & Hagen, 2021). Most participants saw leadership

development as an opportunity to broaden their professional network. Paul, who prioritizes

relationships as noted earlier, found networking beneficial as it "speeds business."

The cohort experience of the program was also impactful to participants. A cohort

learning model provides an opportunity for learning and accountability, while providing social

connection (Bialek & Hagen, 2021). For Veronica, the peer group experience helped her glean

helpful strategies to use in her role: "We definitely talked about some of the challenges that we

were all facing and we're able to share ideas about how to navigate those different challenges and

that was so useful." Emma was impacted by the level of care displayed by her cohort: "We all cared very deeply for each other … I built this group of friends who I care deeply about. I don't know if other cohorts care about each other as much as we did. I mean, we were, like, obnoxious." Olivia continues to maintain contact with cohort members:

My cohort was incredible. I still stay in touch with several individuals within that cohort. We came from all different areas of the organization and have continued to progress. We still bounce ideas off each other. They're great resources and I feel like, had it been another group of people, I'm not sure it would have been the same experience.

Study data indicated that relationships during leadership development play a role in the perception of its impact. Programs that provide mentoring may influence participants' self-efficacy and motivation (Pitichat et al., 2017). Programs that provide a cohort learning model increase opportunities for greater understanding through shared experiences and colleague feedback (Tingle et al., 2017). One surprising aspect was only one participant discussed a relationship with a superior, yet all focused on relationships with mentors and peers. One may also surmise there were attempts to improve relationships with subordinates outlined in theme 4, Team Support and Development, and theme 5, Team Communication.

Synopsis. Relationship development is a key component of leadership development programs, particularly for a group who must maintain relationships with both superiors and subordinates. There were no direct questions about relationships, yet participants noted their importance. Participants responded well to the networking opportunities and the cohort/peer relationships, which allowed them to share concerns and seek feedback from those at their level. However, as feelings about mentoring were mixed, leadership development programs may increase impact by ensuring mentors are not only familiar with the programming, but also with

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the background and goals of the participants. This may also address a noted lack of mention regarding relationships with superiors, who are usually tapped to serve in a mentoring role for lower levels.

Training Factors

In developing leadership development programming, organizations must choose appropriate training methods (Cacioppe, 1998) and ensure support for the program (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). Current leadership development programs have incorporated a mix of theory and practice through classroom learning and real-world experiences. The conceptual framework assumes training factors influencing participants' views of leadership development may be impacted by the applicability of knowledge acquired and the ability to use the training in real-world situations in the workplace.

Theme 8: Topic Applicability

Effective programs analyze and consider the skills and behaviors participants are expected to learn and apply when developing curricula (Day et al., 2021). Participants varied in the topics that resonated with them or were applicable in their roles, supporting the constructivist view that knowledge acquired through these programs is constructed through the curriculum provided and participant experiences.

However, there were varying perspectives regarding program topics. For Emma, there were topics that did not resonate with her: "I was like, I don't know anything about that … there were pieces where I just was like, 'This is not how my work is … this is not the work that I do.'" Eve recalled a session that provided useful information but no takeaways: "I feel like it was just good fyi, nothing that I could actually do with it … I wouldn't take it away. It just wasn't a practical thing for me."

Elizabeth was more vocal about the topics, in that some parts of the program "felt a little bit abstract" based on her experiences at the time of her participation. She also struggled with applying some of the tools in the workplace:

It was a little bit harder to think through how that applied to like my actual decision making in my real job and thinking about, 'okay, how do I take this thing that I learned … and make sure that I actually think about that in the moment when I'm … in the position to make a decision at work …. I'm not sure how much of that really trickled down into my actual decision making processes.

Study data supports the idea that leadership development programming is organization-driven, application of knowledge is participant-driven and situational. While some curricula are created through a "one size fits all" approach, programming should account for individual participants' needs, skill levels and experience (Holt et al., 2018). Effective leadership development programs may take a collaborative approach, where all involved collaborate in the development process (Turner et al., 2018). Additionally, the workplace environment (including work complexity) may influence knowledge transfer (Nafukho et al., 2022).

The perception of topic applicability may also be affected by topic coverage. For example, four participants discussed the program's coverage of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). While two of the participants saw the coverage as positive, two participants who are members of what may be considered marginalized groups mentioned their disappointment in how the topic was addressed. One participant noted, "The DEI stuff for me was just not long. But that's also because that's really, really important to me. And I think it should be really, really important to leadership programs." Another participant stated, "We talked about DEI. But again, it was really from more of a generational perspective … we really didn't speak boldly about the

elephant in the room, which is race and we can't continue to avoid these conversations." This contrast in thought about how this topic was presented is an example of how topic applicability is determined the by the participant based on previous knowledge and experiences.

Theme 9: Concept Review

Research notes training is not valuable if it is not relevant to the job and skills are not sustained (Yamnill & McLean, 2001), and that participants may revert to previous work styles, with managers being less likely to apply training immediately (Santos & Stuart, 2003). Participants stated that review of program concepts throughout and after the program, breaking up the sessions into smaller timeframes, and providing coaching throughout would have been beneficial in retaining information. For Elizabeth, review of topics throughout the program would have been beneficial:

> I think from a just, even from like a learning perspective … anytime you can cover a topic and return to it a few times, you know, even if it's a check in, you know, the next time of like, how, …, how did you implement what you did this last time, and building in more reflective elements.

Emma, who has led leadership development programs in the past, thought breaking up the sessions with review would have been helpful:

> Sometimes we just had people come in and just kind of like talk at us … when there were people who were talking at us for, like, 40 minutes or something, I was like … stop. apply. What questions do you have? Go to the next chunk. Stop! Apply, what questions you have. So, things like that.

Participants did express a desire for follow-up after the program. Eve thought additional coaching sessions would have been helpful after her participation:

There was not really a follow up to how we were doing, how we're implementing things.
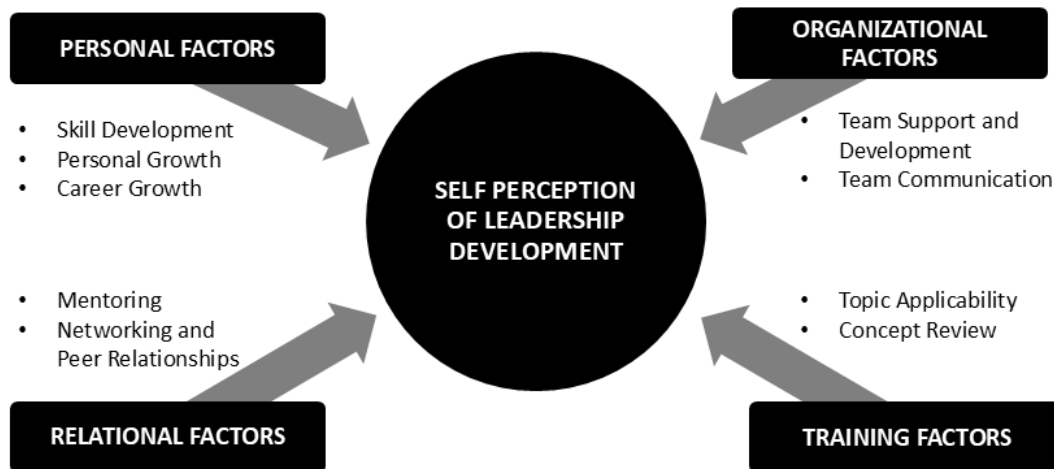
So, I think that would have helped, kind of that accountability piece as well to say, 'Hey, how are you implementing this? And how is it going? How can we help you?'

Study data suggest that participants believe learning to be a reflective process that does not end when leadership development programming concludes. As outlined in theme 2 under personal factors, participants expect leadership development programming to build on prior skills and experiences; through constructivist learning theory, this is accomplished through tasks followed by reflection (Chuang, 2021). However, while most of the research regarding post-leadership development focus on knowledge transfer or evaluation of programming, there is a gap in the literature regarding continued learning after programming has ended and the potential benefits of continued learning for organizations.

Synopsis. Maximum return on investment regarding leadership development is measured by the transfer of knowledge received, but participants must feel confident in their abilities to use what they have learned. In asking questions about topics remembered from the program and if there were portions they could not implement in their workspaces, the intent was to find out what topics may have been more impactful than others. This proved to be true, as many topics were mentioned repeatedly. Questions were not directly asked about learning styles; however, participants suggested potential learning techniques that have been referenced in adult learning theories. One may suggest that the need for review and repetition may be due to competing responsibilities or a lack of time to absorb the subject matter. Figure 2 shows the updated PORT framework with the emergent themes.

Figure 2

The PORT Framework with Themes

PERSONAL FACTORS

- Skill Development
- Personal Growth
- Career Growth

- Mentoring
- Networking and Peer Relationships

RELATIONAL FACTORS

SELF PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

- Team Support and Development
- Team Communication

- Topic Applicability
- Concept Review

TRAINING FACTORS

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative interview study is to explore the perception of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles. Chapter 4 provides study participant demographic data and findings from this study.

Participants were of varying ages, racial identities and length of time in their current leadership roles. Each participant had an opportunity to relay their experiences with leadership development and subsequent implementation of knowledge. RQ1 was, "How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development based on personal, organizational, relational and training factors?" While the interview protocol did not directly ask about impact to allow for participants to recount their experiences organically, presentation of participants' program expectations and pre-program leadership styles opened the door to interpret potential impact. Participants had low or no expectations for leadership development; however, those who did have expectations noted they were met or exceeded. While some participants spoke of having no leadership style, others initially believed in a top-down approach.

Understanding the participants' preconceptions helped relate their experiences to the factors that may influence their perception of leadership development and its impact, as all participants acknowledged a shift in mindset or behavior. There was no topic that was mentioned by all; yet each participant discussed at least one topic that helped them in the workplace.

An assumption of this study was that personal factors affect how participants perceive leadership development, and that it was expected that the program would have perceived personal or professional impact. The premise was that the ability to apply elements of the program, personally or professionally, would influence the perception of impact. While it was assumed that participants' responses in RQ2 would also provide context for the impact referenced in RQ1, a more direct question regarding the impact of leadership development programming would have answered RQ1 more fully.

RQ2 was, "How do personal, organizational, relational or training factors affect implementation of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles?" RQ2 was addressed through presentation of the nine themes that emerged from the data, outlining how personal, organizational, relational and training factors influence the perception of leadership development. These themes were analyzed through a constructivist lens, organized through the conceptual framework for this study, and supported by relevant literature. Participants sought to participate in leadership development to develop skills and enhance their personal and career growth. Leadership development allowed participants to communicate more effectively with their teams while providing opportunities for their professional development. Participants were able to develop their social networks through the cohort based program model and cultivating peer relationships. Many program topics were considered applicable to

participants' workspaces, though review of concepts during and after the program would have been beneficial.

Chapter 5 will present an overview of the study's findings and conclusions, implications for various audiences and opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What is leadership? After culling through the plethora of definitions in research literature, this study has adopted Northouse's (2019, p. 43) definition of leadership as a "process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal." The assumption is that leadership behaviors include being knowledgeable, committed and directive.

Everyone in an organization's hierarchy is affected by the middle level; thus, new responsibilities for those who have moved to a middle-level require capacity to manage new relationships (Caldwell, 2003). However, leadership development programs fail when organizational strategies are unclear and there is a lack of focus and support from the upper levels (Beer et al., 2016). Additionally, those who move from an individual contributor role to a managerial or supervisory responsibility may possess some knowledge but lack the capacity to act on a group's behalf or direct the group toward a goal (Kraaijenbrink, 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the perception of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles who have participated in a leadership development program at a university in Atlanta, Georgia. The catalyst for this study was observing programs that have missed the mark in programming and wanting to understand what occupants of middle-level roles say they need from leadership development programs to be successful. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles describe the impact of
   participation in a leadership development program?

2. How do occupants of middle-level organizational roles perceive leadership development based on personal, organizational, relational and training factors?

This chapter presents a discussion of the study's findings, implications for various audiences and opportunities for future research.

Discussion of the Findings

This study adds to the body of leadership development research regarding how programs are targeted for occupants of middle level roles and how they may apply knowledge. By exploring the perception of leadership development among occupants of middle-level organizational roles, there may be an increased understanding of how best to train potential and new role occupants on their organizational roles and their responsibilities as the bridge between superior and subordinate levels, and how to create an atmosphere supportive of knowledge transfer for greater individual and organizational outcomes.

Change in Mindset or Behavior

Participants may join leadership development programs with no identified leadership style. Yet, while they may not articulate a particular style, they may be influenced by the styles and behaviors of those they deem to be leaders. Conversations with participants showed how individuals view leadership as a concept and their own performance as a leader. These views impact what pieces of programming resonate with individuals.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the word "impact" denotes change. All respondents noted a change in some behavior after leadership development. Changes included being more prepared for difficult conversations, encouraging more team development than just focusing on the work, and communicating more effectively. Additional impact was outlined in the findings, categorized

through personal, organizational, relational and training factors that comprised the conceptual framework for this study.

Personal Factors: Development and Growth

Participants' perception of leadership development may be affected by their experiences and anticipated outcomes (Johnson et al., 2012). Study data support the claim that the perception of leadership development may be affected by how it impacts participants' overall skill development, personal growth and career growth, as well as participants' personal motivations. Participant data also supports the theory that how participants construct knowledge influence organizational outcomes, as programs may be used to gain new skills, or to reinforce or increase the skills they already possess. Incorporating participants' knowledge, abilities and experiences by providing diverse types of learning opportunities (experiential, problem-based or project-based) may prove to be effective curricula. Assessments such as 360-degree feedback and the Birkman Method™ may also prove beneficial by allowing for understanding of personal and team leadership styles and how those styles affect organizational outcomes.

Study data also support the claim that leadership development participants use participation in these programs to display their leadership capacity, advance in their career, through building their resumé or showing interest in development opportunities or higher leadership positions. Programming may prove effective if content is applicable at crucial points in one's career.

Organizational Factors: Team Building for Success

How an organization's leadership handles issues and changes may influence a team member's confidence in the leadership, which may influence the level of a team member's

commitment to working toward successful outcomes. Organizational outcomes, therefore, are linked to team building, effectiveness and communication (Pollack & Matous, 2019).

The level of support from those at upper levels may impact how those at in middle level roles support their teams. Study data indicates that leadership development participants may develop a team approach and focus on encouraging the professional development of their team members. Data also supports the theory that leaders who provide development opportunities may influence how subordinates view the leader and the organization. Team members who feel supported may feel enabled to participate in developing solutions and strategy. Additionally, leaders may be viewed in a positive light by team members who have elevated expectations of themselves; however, leaders who provide an unsupportive environment may negatively affect a team member's motivation to work toward organizational success. Upper-level role occupants can support those at the middle level by modeling expected behaviors, outlining priorities and setting expectations (Dragoni et al., 2013).

As communication is essential to team performance, study data literature illustrates participants' understanding for quality team communication, even when difficult. A leader's understanding of individual and team communication styles may influence levels of trust, strength of relationships and overall organizational culture.

Relational Factors: Relationships Do Matter

A leader's effectiveness may be determined by understanding of their role in an organization and utilization of their internal and external relationships (Cullen-Lester et al., 2017). Through leadership development, participants may cultivate these relationships through networking, connections with mentors, or providing opportunities for teamwork.

Social networking allows the building of personal and professional relationships, as well as the exchanging of ideas with superiors, peers and subordinates. Leadership development programs may facilitate networking through cohort programs, which provide a structure for knowledge exchange as well as the sharing of ideas and challenges. The cohort learning model has been shown to provide social connection and accountability (Bialek & Hagen, 2021). Study data indicates a positive perception of networking and the cohort structure in leadership development programming.

Mentoring is an important piece of development that may impact a participant's personal and professional growth. Study data support this claim; however, due to its importance, the appropriate mentor-mentee pairing is crucial. Mentors should be able to provide support and accountability through the development process, which may be more successful when the pairing have commonalities such as similar industries, responsibilities or career trajectories.

Training Factors: Learn, Review, Do

For leadership development programs to be successful, appropriate curricula and training methods must be relevant to participants' roles and responsibilities (Cacioppe, 1998) and must be supported by the organization (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). Current programs may incorporate theory and practice through a mix of classroom learning and real-world scenarios. Program development may account for skills and behaviors that participants are expected to apply in their roles. Study data indicates certain topics resonated with most of the participants, while other topics may be so specific as to only resonate based on one's job area or workplace challenges. These data support the theory that learning is constructed through a series of program offerings and participant experiences.

If learning is to be sustained and applied, there must be methods that may foster application of knowledge and hinder reversion to previous work behaviors. Study data suggest methods such as concept review throughout the program may be helpful. Providing accountability methods such as post-program coaching or regular check-ins with program graduates may also provide support for knowledge application.

Implications for Practice

Leadership development is about increasing the capacity of leaders. The catalyst for this study was observation of hundreds of occupants of middle-level roles and participation in program development. If one seeks to provide a program considered impactful, understanding the perceptions of the target group is key. Programs may fall short by dismissing the thoughts of the group who is to be led, as followers tend to have varying motivations or ideals (Bastardoz & Van Vugt, 2019).

An eyeopener along this journey was the number of people who, after being informally introduced to the research topic, would weigh in because of their experiences with leaders or as leaders. Those at the middle level usually discuss what they wish they had known prior to assuming their roles. Many of them were promoted from an individual contributor role and had no managing experience, yet they approached the roles through a leader's lens.

Leadership development, however, does not occur in isolation; rather, multiple individuals and groups may impact curricula development. These findings may serve as a grounding or supplemental resource for internal and external entities associated with leadership development, such as practitioners, researchers and current and future occupants of middle-level organizational roles.

Opportunities for Leadership Development Practitioners

Key factors in leadership development are a person's perception of leadership, how participants learn and incorporation of real-world experiences (Holt et al., 2018). The opportunity for leadership development practitioners is to develop curricula topics that will address the needs of the organization while simultaneously motivating those in middle level organizational roles to participate in the program, apply the knowledge acquired, and champion the program to their peers and subordinates. This study may aid in determining the right mix of topics that may target skills needed to increase knowledge transfer and provide maximum return on investment for the organization and participants.

Practitioners developing programming should begin by conducting surveys or focus groups with stakeholders to understand their where development investment should be applied (Foster, 2024). Following these conversations, practitioners should use this data to craft targeted programming while excluding irrelevant topics. As an example, topics recalled by multiple participants as impactful were leadership styles, crucial communication, situational leadership and public speaking. Perceptions of topics regarding business functions of the institution and diversity, equity, and inclusion were mixed, though this may be unique to this study.

Further, study data indicates that the effectiveness of applying adult learning theories to ensure knowledge is reinforced, such as through the use of real-world scenarios, reflection opportunities, and content review during and after program participation. Leadership development programming must also include relational components such as mentoring opportunities and peer groups to be most effective.

Opportunities for Leadership Development Researchers

Literature regarding leadership development focuses on participant experience, skills and

self-development (Day et al., 2021) or on leadership theories and behaviors, feedback, networking and coaching (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). Literature regarding middle-level organizational roles focus their contribution to the organization (Rezvani, 2017) or needed competencies (Sudirman et al., 2019). However, there is a gap in research regarding how to best develop middle-level organizational roles. This study may provide a catalyst for additional research on this group, including how the relationships between this group and their superiors and subordinates may impact leadership development programming focused on relationship building and collaboration.

Data can be gathered through either qualitative or quantitative research design—similar to practitioners, research can incorporate surveys or focus groups to determine the needs of groups based on their organizational ranking and analyze if impact of leadership development is predicated on that ranking. Researchers should consider the implications across industries, diverse groups, and age span.

One challenge to conducting this research may be the broad range of middle level roles. This can be addressed by conducting a study at this level based on criteria such as responsibilities, number of employees supervised or length in current roles, as all of which varied with study participants. Another potential challenge may be a lack of participants or participants not answering honestly due to concerns regarding impact to their employment. Working with practitioners providing the program may help potential participants' view regarding the study's legitimacy and confidentiality.

Opportunities for Former, Current, and Future Participants

Finally, this study may provide insight into areas that prove beneficial for current and future occupants of middle-level roles as well as their team members. While the setting for this

study was a formal leadership development program, potential participants may realize the benefit of classes focused on specific skills or needs (i.e., as a class on communication strategies) or a separate opportunity to build relationships, such as mentoring or networking. Former and current program participants can help develop programming by providing feedback on their experiences.

Former leadership development participants can increase the effectiveness of programming by suggesting topics not covered in their program but which should be considered and may be helpful in the workplace. Former participants should also support the development of team members, as it may result in increased trust in leadership, increased motivation to transfer knowledge, and more productive relationships. Participant feedback is necessary to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a program (Pradarelli et al., 2016).

Current participants in leadership development programs should share in the facilitation of programming by actively engaging in sessions, contributing subject matter expertise when beneficial, and providing real-time feedback to practitioners. Participants may benefit from increased confidence, improved decision-making skills, a greater understanding of the organization and an expanded network of mentors and peers who can serve as resources and sounding boards. Collaborative approaches, where all who are involved participate in the process, may prove effective (Turner et al., 2018).

Individuals considering participation in a leadership development program should research programs to determine if the program will build on their knowledge, improve their skills and signal a desire for career advancement. Future participants should also consider their needs in their current role and whether the curriculum supports those needs. Another consideration should be whether the workplace culture, including both superiors and subordinates, will support

ideas and initiatives that may arise after participation. Finally, it may be helpful to begin developing a professional network or identifying and building a relationship with a mentor prior to leadership development, as both may provide resources during the programming.

Opportunities for Future Research

This qualitative interview study explored the perception of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles. The impact of leadership development included shifts in mindset or behaviors, skill development, enhanced personal and career growth, more effective communication with teams and development of social networks through mentoring and peer relationships. Applicability of topics and concept review were also acknowledged as having an impact. While these findings add to the literature regarding leadership development and middle-level organizational roles, there are several opportunities for future research resulting from this study.

Leadership Development for Larger and Broader Sample Groups

One opportunity for future research would be extension of this study to a larger pool of participants to determine if the responses would be similar. An additional opportunity would be to determine if the personal, organizational, relational and training factors outlined in the PORT framework affect the perception of leadership development across hierarchical levels. Data from this study did not address hierarchical relationships; rather, study participants predominantly focused on conversations with and development of their subordinate teams, highlighting the middle-level/lower-level relationship. Yet, while upper-level occupants have acknowledged the importance of the middle-level, some perceive this level as a block in the leadership chain (Huy, 2001). Additional research may focus on how leadership development can impact the relationship between upper-level roles as superiors and middle-level roles as subordinates.

Leadership Development and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

As noted in the data, two participants voiced their dissatisfaction with the coverage of diversity, equity and inclusion in this program. With more organizations shifting their efforts regarding DEI, further research focused directly on experiences surrounding DEI in leadership development may be helpful. An opportunity for research would be how this shift affects the perceptions of the inclusion or exclusion of this topic in leadership development curricula, including if there is a difference in perception among demographic groups. Diverse and inclusive leadership and teams may enhance organizational outcomes (Looney, 2021). As workforces become more ethnically and generationally diverse, this research may impact how programs are crafted to increase the skills and capacity of members of marginalized groups, potentially creating a more diverse pool of potential leaders.

Virtual Learning in the Aftermath of COVID-19

One study participant discussed how the last classes for his cohort were virtual due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and how that affected his overall experience:

> I do not recommend the virtual … I don't think leadership is virtual. I think management can be done virtually. I don't think leadership can be done virtually. (It's) putting intelligent people all working together in a room and trying to be innovative and strategic. That's leadership.

COVID-19 changed how organizations managed business in a virtual environment, including how leadership development programs were administered. With this came a change in how leaders worked with their teams to continue production, possibly employing new leadership behaviors or changing their team's working dynamic. The pandemic also changed how education was offered; studies suggest that education in virtual environment may have been detrimental to

knowledge acquisition and retention (Stanistreet et al., 2021). An opportunity for research would be a qualitative study on the pandemic's influence offering leadership development in a virtual space and if there was a subsequent impact on retention and knowledge transfer.

Summary

This study contributes to the general body of knowledge regarding leadership development. More specifically, this study provides a needed contribution to the dearth of literature focused on developing middle level hierarchical roles. Exploring the middle-level experiences with leadership development increases understanding of the development needs of current and future participants, which may result in structuring a topical curriculum that provides maximum return on investment.

The catalyst for this study was observation of middle-level roles in organizations and seeing how these roles serve as a bridge between the national/international level and the "boots on the ground." This qualitative study confirmed that there are personal, organizational, relational and training factors that impact the perception of leadership development among middle-level roles. A review of the literature and study data show that these factors play a role in individual goal setting and achievement, motivation to participate in leadership development and knowledge transfer.

Through various learning theories, exercises, self and peer assessments, and networking and mentoring opportunities, participants constructed their knowledge and attempted to transfer that knowledge in their roles. This construction can be augmented through providing relevant program topics and reinforced knowledge during and after programming.

While there are challenges for individuals at all levels of an organization, an assumption was that occupants of middle-level roles faced unique challenges being responsible to both upper

and lower levels. This study's data support literature indicating occupants of the middle level may have responsibilities that require employing leadership behaviors (inspiring trust, team development) and management behaviors (day-to-day operations, team mobilization). Yet, it became evident that respondents viewed their roles through a leader's lens, as it was important to all participants that their teams felt empowered to present ideas, provide feedback and have difficult conversations with their leader.

Finally, while this study may have implications for leadership development practitioners, researchers and participants in all stages (former, current and future), the impact of this study may reach beyond these groups. It is the contention that this study can be replicated, in current format or with modifications, to gather rich qualitative data from anyone who has participated in a leadership development program and seeks to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes for participants, teams and organizations.

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APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

IRB Approval

Notification of Approval

To: Andrew Jackson

Link: PROJECT00009647

P.I.: Andrew Jackson

Title: Exploring The Perception of Leadership Development Among Occupants of Middle-Level Organizational Roles

ACTIONS TO TAKE:

This submission has been approved. You can access the correspondence letter using the following link:

Correspondence_for_PROJECT00009647.pdf(0.01)

To review additional details, click the link above to access the project workspace. For Non-Exempt research and if required, date-stamped consent documents can be found in the Documents section under "Final" in PDF form.

Please take our survey on your submission experience. Your feedback is very important.
https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_3C0bBlC1UVQxiyF

APPENDIX B

Web Version of Informed Consent Letter

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
1785

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Study
Exploring The Perception of Leadership Development Among Occupants of Middle-Level Organizational Roles

Principal Investigator
Dr. Andrew Jackson
Mary Frances Early College of Education, University of Georgia
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Co-Investigator
Shaneesa N. Ashford
Mary Frances Early College of Education, University of Georgia
snashford@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to explore participation in and implementation of leadership development by occupants of middle-level organizational roles. You are invited to be in this research study because you participated in the Emerging Leaders leadership development program.

Participation in the Study
If you agree to participate in the study:

- You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire about your professional experience.
- You will be asked to participate in a recorded interview of up to 60 minutes.
- You may be contacted to participate in a 30-minute follow-up conversation to discuss parts of our analysis.
- Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty.
- Your decision to participate will have no impact on your participation in other leadership programs.
- You will be able to withdraw from the study at any time and your data will be immediately destroyed.
- You can skip any questions that may make you uncomfortable.
- You will not receive any compensation for your participation.

Potential Risks

- We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could accidentally be disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, we will employ the use of pseudonyms and maintain strict control of all recordings. Pseudonyms will also be used with any quotes used from the interview.
- Participant data from this study will not be shared with other researchers. All electronic consent forms, recordings and transcriptions will be maintained in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. Recordings will be used to ensure accurate data transcription. Following transcription, the recordings will be destroyed.
- This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed

Potential Benefits

- Your participation, through expressing your perceptions and opinions, will contribute to the knowledge base regarding creating leadership development programs for occupants of middle-level roles.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Shaneesa N. Ashford
Ed.D Candidate
Workforce Education and Instructional Technology
University of Georgia

	Yes
I have participated in the Emerging Leaders program.	O
I currently occupy a middle-level organizational role at the university as outlined by the Emerging Leaders program.	O
I consent to participating in this study.	O

Please type your first and last name.

Please provide your email address so we may contact you to schedule the interview.

Please use your finger, stylus or computer mouse to add your electronic signature.

×   SIGN HERE

clear

>>

Interview Protocol

EXPLORING THE PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG OCCUPANTS OF MIDDLE-LEVEL ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

PRE-INTERVIEW SCRIPT

I am Shaneesa Ashford and I am conducting this interview to understand your experiences during and after a leadership development program. I am really interested in hearing your story, so the more you can tell me will be helpful. There are no right or wrong answers.

Before we start, I want to remind you of informed consent as outlined in the invitation. (**EXPLAIN**)

Please feel free to ask questions on any of the aspects of your participation, including but not limited to risks, benefits, and concerns. I will be happy to answer your questions.

Please choose a pseudonym that will be recorded in the research.

I am placing a link in the chat for you to submit demographic information. If you are having trouble, I can record it manually.

Next, I will be changing your name on screen so your pseudonym will be recorded in the transcription.

This interview will be recorded. Do you consent to being recorded? (**YES/NO**)

Are you ready to begin? (**YES/NO**)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTIONS

- *Confirmation of demographic information*

PARTICIPATION IN PROGRAM
- You recently participated in a leadership development program. What made you decide to join the program?

- What were your expectations of leadership development prior to your participation?

- What are some of the topics you recall from the program?

- Tell me about your leadership philosophy prior to your participation in the program.

AFTER PARTICIPATION IN PROGRAM

- After participation in the program, what were your initial thoughts about implementing what you learned when you returned to your workplace?

- Can you give me an example of how you implemented a skill or tactic you learned through your leadership development program?
  Prompt: *How did you implement this skill or tactic with your team or your superiors?*
  Prompt: *How did this skill or tactic affect your overall execution of your role?*

- Did you experience any difficulties implementing any of the training from the program? If so, can you give me an example and the outcome?
  Prompt: *What made this training difficult to implement?*
  Prompt: *Were there any factors that contributed to these difficulties?*
  Prompt: *How did you address this difficulty with your team or your superiors?*

- What would have aided you in implementing the training you received?
  Prompt: *Were there any parts of the training you could not implement? Please explain.*

FINAL QUESTION

- Is there anything else that you wish to share with me regarding your experiences during or after the training?

CLOSING SCRIPT

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study. Should you need to contact me you may respond to the address on the follow-up email address. We may also contact you regarding our findings. Do we have permission to contact you?