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Strategies Leaders of Small Businesses Use to Improve Organizational Performance

Julie Charette
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Julie A. Charette

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Review Committee
Dr. Janice Garfield, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Meridith Wentz, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Denise Land, University Reviewer, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2023

Abstract

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by

Julie A. Charette

MS, University of Fredericton, 2020

BS, Laurentian University, 2010

Consulting Capstone Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

July 2023

Abstract

Small businesses significantly contribute to the global economy, yet some leaders need more strategies to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. These barriers can create challenges that threaten the survival of the organization in a competitive business environment. Grounded in Argyris's single- and double-loop learning theory, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies leaders of small businesses used to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The participants comprised three senior leaders of a small for-profit organization in the natural hair care industry in the Northeastern region of the United States. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, archival documents, publicly available data, and academic literature. Through thematic analysis, six key themes were identified: (a) leadership focus, (b) communication, (c) strategic management, (d) voice-of-the-customer, (e) financial management, and (f) product research and development. A key recommendation is for leaders of small businesses to leverage social media platforms to facilitate customer engagement and capture voice-of-the-customer data to support taking intelligent risks and enhance customer experience and satisfaction. The contributions to positive social change include the potential for business leaders to promote productivity, agility, adaptability, and thrive in their industries and economically benefit their communities.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I want to thank God for surrounding me with all the patient, loving, and supportive people who stuck by my side throughout this doctoral journey. I would particularly thank my husband, Al, my best friend, soulmate, and number one fan. He has been a pillar of support, honesty, patience, organization, and stability during this doctoral journey that continued during all the events that happened in our lives. His unconditional love and encouragement proved invaluable in giving me the confidence to persevere no matter the obstacle and work hard to achieve this monumental goal. To my children, Zak, Christian, and Isabelle, who inspired, encouraged, and loved me throughout this journey, never be afraid to pursue your dreams. Remember that anything is achievable with hard work, dedication, and consistency. I want to thank my parents, Richard and Monique, who always encouraged me to pursue my goals and encouraged me to become the best version of me I could be. Their love, support, and desire to see me succeed motivated me to be accountable and gain the knowledge and experience to promote positive change. To my friend and colleague Michelle, your friendship, love, and support proved invaluable in encouraging me to push through the discomforts and overcome challenges to complete this doctoral study.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

I used the 2021–2022 Baldrige Performance Excellence Program as a guide in completing this qualitative single case study to explore strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Per the Walden University Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) Consulting Capstone guidelines (Walden University Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2021), I served as the researcher and scholar consultant. I collaborated with leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States. Using the Baldrige assessment criteria allowed me to systematically evaluate my client organization's small business operations and find sustainable solutions to promote positive social change.

Background of the Problem

Leaders of small businesses face constant challenges sustaining their operations in a globally competitive market. These challenges are of concern because the development and sustainability of small businesses is essential to improving economic conditions and promoting a healthy competitive business market (Nusratovich & Usmonkhan, 2022). In 2021, there were 32.5 million small businesses in the United States, accounting for over 99% of total businesses (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2021a). Since the 1990s, leaders of small businesses have contributed to the nation's economy by creating 12.7 million jobs, representing 62% of new jobs created (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2021b). Therefore, political leaders rely on the contributions of small business owners to stimulate the economy.

Owners of small businesses play an integral role in contributing to the global economy. The disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges that threatened leaders' efforts to ensure survival and sustainability (Engidaw, 2022). Leaders of small businesses face complex and challenging tasks of adapting and evolving their practices to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage (Lusiantoro et al., 2022). There is a high failure rate among owners of small businesses who cannot sustain their operations because of the lack of resources and inability to improve performance (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020). Therefore, a qualitative study on the strategies used by leaders of small businesses to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage is appropriate because their success directly affects society, their communities, and the global economy.

Problem and Purpose

Leaders of small businesses have an increasingly challenging task of remaining competitive in a global market. In 2021, small businesses were responsible for employing 46.8% of the U.S. workforce. However, on average, 87% of small businesses fail in their first year of operations, and 61% cannot sustain their operations for more than 5 years (U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2019). The general business problem was that the ineffective strategies of some leaders of small businesses could hinder their ability to improve organizational performance, promote growth, and gain and sustain a competitive advantage. The specific business problem was some leaders of small businesses lack strategies to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The target population comprised three leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States who successfully implemented strategies to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. By implementing strategies based on the research findings, leaders of small businesses may be able to promote a productive work environment to grow and thrive in their industries. Moreover, leaders of successful small businesses can potentially promote positive social change by becoming role models for members of their communities.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised three leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States. After an in-depth and rigorous vetting process, the DBA Consulting Capstone administrators used a purposive sampling approach to select this organization to participate in this research study. Purposive sampling is a subjective form of nonprobability sampling in which a researcher uses their judgment to carefully select a population that they identify as fitting a particular profile and being appropriate to answer the overarching research question (Campbell et al., 2020). Yin (2018) noted that many researchers conducting qualitative case studies use purposive sampling because it allows them to deliberately select participants who will provide valuable insight to answer the research question. Similarly, Ames et al. (2019) explained that some researchers find it advantageous to use purposive sampling because it allows them to select the participants and gain a rich understanding of the business phenomenon. Saunders et al. (2015) identified that purposive sampling is appropriate for researchers working with small sample sizes, such as qualitative single case studies, to satisfy their research objectives. Therefore, I deliberately selected three senior leaders from the small for-profit organization with power and influence over planning and implementing the organization’s strategic initiative to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

As an independent scholar in the DBA Consulting Capstone program, I worked directly with a small for-profit organization vetted by the DBA Consulting Capstone administrators. After establishing initial contact with the client organization, I selected three senior leaders with experience planning and managing strategic initiatives. Because of the geographical distance between myself and the organization’s leaders, I gained initial access to the participants via email and telephone. After establishing a connection with the leaders, I prepared and presented them with a copy of the service order agreement for their approval. To comply with the data sources and collection protocols of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which required scholars to host virtual meetings, I facilitated weekly meetings with my client leader through Zoom. I used the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) as a guide to systematically assess the leaders' operations and uncover opportunities for improvement. Additionally, I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and sent each participant a consent form via email before commencing the interviews.

To achieve data triangulation, I selected multiple data sources based on the IRB preapproved list for the DBA Consulting Capstone program (see Appendix B). I conducted semistructured interviews with three leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States to understand the strategies they used to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. I interviewed each participant individually and created audio recordings to facilitate the transcriptions. The client organization's archival data were an additional data source I gathered to gain rich insight into their operations. Other data sources collected included public documents such as public websites, industry performance benchmarks, and social media content. Moreover, I critically reviewed academic and professional literature, including seminal books and peer-reviewed articles, to acquire a rich body of knowledge, strengthen my research findings, and explain the business phenomenon.

Nature of the Study

Researchers can choose a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approach to conduct research. Qualitative research is subjective (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019) and involves techniques such as interviews and observation to understand participants' personal experiences (Johnson et al., 2020). Quantitative researchers collect objective statistical data to test a hypothesis and explain the relationship between variables (Schreurs et al., 2022). A researcher using a mixed methods approach combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the business problem (Dawadi et al., 2021). A qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because my objective was to gain a holistic understanding of a social phenomenon within the setting of my assigned client organization. A quantitative approach was inappropriate because the goal was not to understand relationships between variables. Additionally, a mixed methods approach was inappropriate because the focus of this research study was not to collect a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to answer the overarching research question.

Qualitative design choices include case study, ethnography, and phenomenology. The goal of qualitative case study research is to conduct a thorough investigation to gain a holistic view of the particularities and complexities of a business phenomenon (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). Similarly, Hercegovac et al. (2020) discussed how a case study provides a flexible approach to investigating and understanding the complexities of a business phenomenon. A researcher who selects an ethnographic design studies a specific group's culture, behaviors, and interactions (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The ethnography approach was not suitable because the purpose of this study was not to explore cultural events and behaviors.

The goal of using a phenomenological approach is to explore and interpret the lived experience of participants through a series of lengthy interviews (Frechette et al., 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019). The case study was appropriate for this study because the goal was to understand real-world business complexities and explore the strategies to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The phenomenological approach was not suitable because the goal of the research did not focus on individual lived experiences.

Research Question

What strategies do leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to help improve your organization's performance, growth, and competitive advantage?
2. What strategies were the most effective for improving organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage?
3. How did you implement the strategies for improving organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage?
4. What were the primary barriers when implementing performance improvement, growth, and competitive advantage strategies?
5. How did you address those primary barriers when implementing performance improvement, growth, and competitive advantage strategies?
6. How do you measure the effectiveness of performance, growth, and competitive advantage strategies?
7. What modifications have you made to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage strategies?
8. What more would you like to tell me about your strategies to help improve your organization's performance, growth, and competitive advantage?

Conceptual Framework

I used Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop learning model as the conceptual framework for this qualitative single case study. The single- and double-loop learning model is based on learning and feedback to help leaders of organizations improve their decision-making processes (Argyris, 1976). Argyris explained how single- and double-loop learning is a strategic initiative that helps leaders of organizations positively influence the attitudes and behaviors that will improve motivation, engagement, and commitment to the organization. Embracing an environment conducive to learning is vital for leaders of small businesses to reflect on their capabilities and use knowledge to find innovative solutions and improve performance (Hermawati, 2020).

Single- and double-loop learning provided a lens for exploring strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance growth and competitive advantage. Argyris (1982) argued that using single- and double-loop learning is an effective strategy that the executives and leadership team of an organization can use to diagnose issues and find sustainable solutions, thus improving individual and organizational performance. Organizational learning could help leaders of small businesses to reflect on and learn from their successes and failures, question the organizational design, and make adjustments to promote positive change and enhance performance (Latham, 2016). Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop learning theory aligned with this qualitative case study because it provided a lens to examine strategies leaders of small businesses can use to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Operational Definitions

Baldrige Performance Excellence Framework: A comprehensive assessment tool used to gain a holistic and systematic understanding of a leader's organization (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2023). Leaders use the Baldrige Performance Framework assessment tool to evaluate their strengths and opportunities for improvements and refine their processes to achieve exceptional performance and gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Competitive advantage: The assets, capabilities, resources, and opportunities leaders exploit to produce and sell goods and services that have better quality and value and lower cost than their market competitors to create and sustain superior performance (Porter, 1985).

Locs: A hairstyle that originated in the ancient Greek and African regions where individuals coil, braid, twist, or roll strands of hair to create the appearance of a rope (Owagbemi, 2022). A loc hairstyle is easier to create on individuals with coarse or coiled hair (Owagbemi, 2022). Locs help individuals to retain the moisture in their hair and to maintain their hairstyle for long periods of time (Owagbemi, 2022).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions consist of a researcher's ideas and theories that they accept as true regardless of the lack of supporting evidence (Adler, 2022). Researchers should acknowledge their assumptions in their research study because it could create inherent risks. I made several assumptions throughout this research project. First, I assumed that the participants in this study acted with honesty, transparency, and integrity when answering questions during the semistructured interviews. Second, I assumed the client would act transparently by granting me access to all the archival and proprietary data required to complete the study. Third, I assumed I would collect sufficient evidence from the semistructured interviews and data to achieve data saturation and answer the overarching research question. Last, I assumed that the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) assessment tool was appropriate for gaining a holistic understanding of my client organization and that its use would increase the validity and reliability of my study.

Limitations

The limitations of a research study refer to the potential weaknesses that could impact the results of the qualitative case study (Yin, 2018). Munthe-Kaas et al. (2019) observed that acknowledging weaknesses allows the researcher to justify how the limitations do not affect the quality and conclusions of the research findings. There are several limitations to my doctoral study. First, choosing a single case study design and selecting three leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United Stated could affect the generalizability of the results because the findings are limited to a specific industry and geographic location. Furthermore, focusing my research on an organization located in one region of the United States could affect the transferability of the findings.

Delimitations

The delimitations of a study refer to the boundaries consciously set by the researcher to establish the parameters and scope of the study (Yin, 2018). The delimitations I established for this qualitative single case study included selecting (a) a population composed of leaders of one small for-profit organization, (b) a sample size of three leaders of the small for-profit organization, and (c) the geographical location of the Northeastern region of the United States.

Significance of the Study

Leaders of small businesses are constantly searching for effective strategies to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Successfully implementing performance management strategies is integral for leaders to overcome challenges, thrive, and promote sustainability (Mira et al., 2019). The findings from this study could provide recommendations for creative and innovative strategies that leaders of small businesses can use to effectively enhance performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings from this study could contribute to business practices by offering rich context on effective strategies to improve organizational performance, promote growth, and gain and sustain a competitive advantage. A leader's ability to strategically and effectively implement performance enhancement initiatives is a predictor of the organization's capability to innovate (Alsafadi & Altahat, 2021). Leaders of small businesses could gain valuable insight by evaluating the effectiveness of their strategies and finding areas of improvement. The leaders of small businesses could draw on the findings of this case study to gain a deeper understanding of successful strategies to improve performance and gain a competitive advantage, thus potentially contributing to profitable business practices. Leaders who develop and sustain positive and profitable business practices help support their communities' social and economic development, thus positively contributing to society.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from this study could contribute to positive social change by providing leaders of small businesses with valuable insight into incorporating strategies that create an environment that supports performance improvement initiatives. Leaders of small businesses could use the strategies discussed in this case study to provide growth opportunities for their businesses to thrive in their industries, thus potentially enhancing sales and profits and economically benefiting their communities. Moreover, the findings from this study shed light on the successes of female leaders of small businesses, which could promote positive change by enabling these leaders to give back to their communities by creating jobs and becoming role models to women and girls.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies leaders of small businesses use to enhance organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. I used Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop framework as the lens through which to view the business problem. I executed an exhaustive critical review of scholarly literature and seminal work relevant to my research topic.

In business research, completing a review of the professional and academic literature is integral to finding credible and supporting literature to help explain the business phenomenon. Paul and Criado (2020) discussed how the doctoral study literature review component provides readers with a comprehensive, in-depth overview of academic articles that support and strengthen the research question. A thorough review of the literature helps the researcher provide readers with a comprehensive look into the research top and offers a lens by which to view the business problem (Lindgreen et al., 2021) relative to the performance, growth, and competitive advantage of small businesses.

Executing a critical literature review helps the researcher strengthen their arguments by studying existing knowledge, uncovering rich insight, and synthesizing the presentation of the study's findings (Snyder, 2019). Moreover, the researcher can identify gaps in the current literature, thus creating opportunities for future research (Varpio et al., 2020). A robust and exhaustive critical literature review offered a solid foundation to analyze and synthesize current knowledge on the study topic. With the knowledge I gained, I could better explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to enhance organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

I selected various peer-reviewed articles that created the foundation of this literature review. I searched for literature using multiple Walden University Library databases and search engines such as ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Business Source Complete, Emerald Management Journals, ScienceDirect, Taylor Francis, SAGE, and Google Scholar to find credible peer-reviewed articles for my doctoral study. The keywords and phrases I used during the search process included *small business performance*, *small business sustainability strategies*, *dynamic capabilities*, *organizational learning*, *double-loop learning*, *feedback loops*, *small business performance management*, *resource-based view theory*, *competitive strategy for small businesses*, *change management for small businesses*, *small business performance improvement strategies*, *strategic planning*, *succession planning*, *succession planning for family-owned businesses*, *family-owned* *businesses*, and *Baldrige Framework*. Using advanced filter searches, I limited my literature search to articles published between 2019 and 2023. I used EndNote, a citation software, and a literature review matrix spreadsheet to track my searches and efficiently reduce redundancies and duplicates. I selected 111 resources to include in this review of professional and academic literature, of which 91 (82%) were published between 2019 and 2023, and 98 (88%) were peer reviewed (see Table 1). The 20 sources published before 2019 consisted of seminal theorists' work that added context and depth to the phenomenon explored.

Table **1**

Summary of Sources Used in the Review of Professional and Academic Literature

Source	No. of peer-reviewed sources	No. of sources published between 2019 and 2023	No. of sources published before 2019	Total
Article	98	90	11	101
Book	0	1	9	10
Total	98	91	20	111

In the first section of the literature review, I introduce the single-loop and double-loop learning theory, the lens through which I viewed my business problem. I also discuss alternate theories considered for the research.

Conceptual Framework

Single-Loop and Double-Loop Learning

Organizational learning is integral for leaders to help their workforce gain the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to improve performance. Argyris and Schön (1996) identified that leaders could promote a learning culture to help their workforce acquire the knowledge required to enhance their capabilities and adapt to changing environments. Learning is a permanent and complex process leaders must embrace to develop, manage, and transfer the knowledge required to solve business problems (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek et al., 2019). Saks and Haccoun (2019) discussed how organizational learning occurs when leaders take a systematic approach and implement processes that create, share, diffuse and apply knowledge within the organization. Organizational learning is critical for leaders to create an environment conducive to gaining knowledge, insight, and skills to help achieve their strategic objectives (Kools & George, 2020). Leaders could cultivate an organizational learning culture to acquire knowledge, detect issues, and make adequate corrections to thrive in a competitive environment (Blaique et al., 2022). Leaders who embrace and reinforce a learning culture within the organization create a strategy to develop their skills and those of their workforce to improve capabilities, increase efficiencies, and create a sustainable competitive advantage.

Leaders should transition from single- to double-loop learning to help their workforce learn, evolve, and find sustainable solutions to business problems. Argyris (1976) developed the single- and double-loop learning model to explain how different forms of organizational learning produce different outcomes. Argyris (1982) argued that for organizational learning to occur, leaders must access sufficient knowledge and resources. Argyris and Schön (1978) elaborated on the theory by identifying how single- and double-loop learning is a learning process allowing leaders to detect and solve business problems. Learning is a process by which leaders identify, detect, and correct errors to help them achieve organizational excellence (Argyris, 1990). Argyris (1990) explained that learning occurs when individuals gain insight into the problem, test new insights in practice, and identify consequences resulting from new knowledge. To successfully embrace a learning environment that drives innovation and creativity, leaders must understand single- and double-loop learning constructs and identify and implement strategies that systematically improve the system's design.

In single-loop learning, leaders identify issues relative to their situation and adapt their behaviors and actions accordingly (Argyris, 1976). Leaders who use single-loop learning only correct the symptom of the problem without analyzing or identifying the root cause. Argyris (1990) explained that leaders using a single-loop learning approach help solve the presenting problem without considering how to determine how the fundamental problem manifested in the first place. Therefore, the focus of single-loop learning is to improve a specific issue or process without correcting the underlying problem in the system (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Similarly, Latham (2016) described how single-loop learning focused on adjusting the current system, thus overlooking required changes to the organization’s design. Therefore, the focal point of single-loop learning processes is the leaders adjusting the action based on the error without understanding its root cause.

On the other hand, double-loop learning occurs when leaders integrate knowledge and actions and exploit learning opportunities to improve the system (Argyris, 1982). Argyris (2002) explained how embracing a double-loop approach allows leaders to adopt a creative thinking approach and find solutions that do not conform to standard procedures and processes. Latham (2016) discussed how leaders using a double-loop method would question the organization's design and integrate learning loops into their systems to ensure the continuous improvement of their processes. Leaders of small businesses who implement double-loop learning processes could uncover innovative solutions to improve operating efficiencies, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

In an increasingly complex and rapidly changing business environment, it is integral for leaders to embrace organizational learning to gain the knowledge and competencies required to adapt to the change (Blaique et al., 2022). Similarly, Kools and George (2020) discussed how organizational learning is a process that leaders should integrate into their strategic management practices to redefine their operations, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Argyris (1982) explained that a leader's ability to detect and correct errors indicates single-loop learning. Latham (2016) described how leaders must move beyond single-loop to double-loop learning by making fundamental changes to the organization's design. Double-loop learning requires the leadership team to use their critical thinking skills to reflect on events and employ a learning-oriented approach to systematically modify routines and practices (Matsuo et al., 2020). Leaders must understand the relationship between the different stakeholders and how the changes to one stakeholder group impact the others.

For leaders of small businesses, embracing double-loop learning and integrating feedback loops are vital to assess their state of operations, identify problems and gaps in the system, and make changes accordingly to improve the system. Organizational learning allows leaders to collectively exploit individual knowledge and transform it into organizational knowledge (Basten & Haamann, 2018). Learning is a continuous and progressive process, and feedback loops are essential in developing and adapting strategies to achieve long-term success (Carless, 2019). To remain competitive in their industries, leaders must develop, adjust, and reconfigure work processes to adapt to changes and stay competitive (Hernández-Linares et al., 2021). Identifying gaps in processes and integrating feedback loops to improve processes continuously is vital to improving performance. Leaders who embrace organizational learning encourage their workforce to reflect on the routines, processes, and beliefs that reduce organizational efficiency and use critical thinking to identify alternative approaches to improve performance (Xie, 2019). Similarly, Basten and Haamann (2018) discussed how organizational learning helps influence behaviors, attitudes, and culture, thus improving decision-making processes. Therefore, leaders who embrace double-loop learning can influence the workforce and act as catalysts to promote positive change.

Similarly, Patky (2020) explained how organizational learning is a process that involves reflecting on the knowledge of past insights and actions and the impact of those actions on future organizational practices and procedures. Patky also discussed the importance of transformative learning, which entails leveraging past knowledge and exploring new knowledge to align the workforce's skills with the demanding skills of the market. Exploiting past knowledge and gaining new knowledge to adjust systems and designs aligns with Argyris and Schön’s (1996) constructs of double-loop learning.

Double-loop learning and feedback loops are essential for organizational leaders to learn from past and present experiences and find innovative solutions that will allow them to improve performance (Argyris, 1982). Organizational learning is pivotal to promoting change by improving processes and skills through acquiring knowledge and insight (Tsutsui et al., 2022). Mohmoud et al. (2019) described how the double-loop learning process occurs when individuals understand that some past practices and knowledge are irrelevant and embrace gaining new knowledge to integrate into their work routines to improve performance. Building on current knowledge with new ideas and theories to reimagine and design best practices and organization systems helps leaders improve their learning capabilities (Tsutsui et al., 2022). By questioning past knowledge and practices, leaders of small businesses can identify the effectiveness of their techniques and find effective strategies to improve processes deemed ineffective.

Leaders of small businesses can use a double-loop learning approach to identify and solve business problems and put processes in place to avoid similar issues in the future (Latham, 2016). Patky (2020) cautioned that ineffective organizational learning strategies could adversely affect the progress of the changes and inadvertently impede the behaviors and attitudes required to improve. Moreover, Latham (2016) argued that leaders must follow through and measure the progress of their learning and change incentives or risk derailing their initiatives to improve performance. McLoughlin et al. (2020) explained how adaptive management practices embrace double-loop and reflexive learning through the assessment, design, implantation, monitoring, evaluation, and modifying processes to promote continuous learning and adapt to constant changes.

Double-loop learning encourages creativity and innovation allowing individuals to reflect, test, and challenge existing ideas and theories and develop new approaches to promote growth and sustainability (Hesjedal et al., 2020). Leaders who monitor and manage their strategic initiatives and modify their processes accordingly promote an environment that works to achieve systematic change, thus potentially improving performance. Double-loop learning is a strategy leaders could use to identify business problems, acquire, and enhance knowledge and competencies, and consider various alternatives to improve their organization’s design, thus improving operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Alternative Theories to Single- and Double-Loop Learning

Other notable theories could help explain and support the business phenomenon. Based on the scope and context of this qualitative single case study, Argyris’s (1976) research on single- and double-loop learning was most appropriate to explain the business problem. However, Penrose’s (1959) resource-based view (RBV) theory and Teece et al.’s (1997) dynamic capabilities theory are other theories that could have provided alternate explanations to support the overarching research question.

Resource-Based View Theory

The RBV is an alternate theory to double-loop learning by understanding how leaders of organizations can leverage their tangible and intangible resources to gain a competitive advantage. Penrose (1959) developed the RBV theory to explain how an organization can understand and manage its resources to predict performance and competitive advantage. Wernerfelt (1984) elaborated on Penrose’s (1959) theory by exploring the value of evaluating an organization by its resources to exploit strategic options. Leaders can adequately leverage their tangible and intangible resources to develop, implement, modify, and manage their strategies to enhance performance, growth, and competitiveness (Lütjen et al., 2019).

Similarly, Zahra (2021) discussed how leaders could use the RBV theory to gain a rich understanding of their resources and determine how to leverage them to create and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, the RBV framework could help leaders explain their strategic choices and strategies to manage resources to enhance growth (Zahra, 2021). These authors highlighted the importance of using a framework like RBV to determine how to leverage their resources to achieve their strategic objectives. Theories relating to the development of resources could have served as a valuable framework for identifying strategies leaders of small businesses could use to leverage and develop their tangible and intangible resources to enhance performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

The RBV theory supports double-loop learning because leaders could use the RBV to assess their tangible and intangible resources to gain a holistic understanding of the strengths, limitations, and modifications required to help the organization gain a strategic advantage. Leaders of small businesses constantly look for creative strategies to help them leverage their resources. Lukovszki et al. (2021) explained how leaders of small businesses with limited resources seek innovative ways to exploit and optimize their resources and capabilities to enhance performance. Lukovszki et al. discussed how leaders could guide their teams in achieving superior performance through the optimal use and management of resources.

Leaders of small businesses could use the RBV theory to understand the impact of developing and improving their resources on organizational performance. More particularly, leaders who understand the value and limitations of their internal capabilities can exploit attractive opportunities and mitigate threats that could impact profitability (Dyer et al., 2020). Similarly, Harsch and Festing (2020) identified that having a comprehensive understanding of internal resources allows leaders of small businesses to improve their agility by adapting and modifying resources to enhance organizational performance and sustainability. By promoting an environment that is flexible and adaptive, leaders could eliminate processes and resources that do not add-value to their operations and systematically respond to the changing demands of their consumers (Palange & Dhatrak, 2021). Shalini and Maiya (2019) explained that leaders make carefully thought-out strategic choices when evaluating their resources and eliminating those that fail to add value in contributing to the organization’s success. Leaders of small businesses must find creative ways to leverage their limited resources and exploit opportunities to acquire the resources and support to gain a competitive advantage. Embracing a flexible, adaptive approach could allow leaders to modify structures, processes, and resource allocation to optimize productivity.

Freeman et al. (2021) argued that although the RBV is a popular theory in strategic management, there are gaps in the framework that prevent leaders from obtaining a holistic view of their capabilities. Freeman et al. suggested that the RBV theory be supplemented by an additional framework, such as the stakeholder theory, to provide management with guidelines on building and maintaining sustainable relationships with all stakeholder groups to maximize performance and competitive advantage. On the other hand, Rodrigues et al. (2021) identified that leaders of small businesses could overcome the limitations of the RBV theory by embracing a dynamic capabilities perspective to gain a holistic understanding of strategies to build and develop organizational capabilities. Likewise, Apascaritei and Elvira (2021) discussed how dynamic capabilities are an extension of RBV and help fill the gaps by allowing leaders to sense, seize, and reconfigure their resources accordingly to transform processes and improve capacity. Although the RBV provided valuable insight into how leaders could leverage their tangible and intangible assets to gain a competitive advantage, there is insufficient critical analysis to holistically understand and correct underlying problems.

Dynamic Capabilities

To thrive in a complex and competitive environment, leaders must evaluate their capabilities and identify strategies to improve and adapt them effectively to navigate change. Teece et al. (1997) developed the dynamic capabilities theory to explain how leaders design, integrate, and reconfigure their internal and external capacity and capabilities to address rapidly changing conditions. Similarly, Apascaritei and Elvira (2021) explained that dynamic capabilities refer to a leader's ability to identify, develop, adapt, integrate, configure, and leverage internal and external resources to improve performance and agility to thrive in constantly changing environments. Bocken and Geradts (2020) explained that leaders must develop, refine, and reconfigure their dynamic capabilities to effectively transform their business model, thus promoting innovation and competitiveness. Furthermore, Pundziene et al. (2019) discussed how developing dynamic capabilities allow organizational leaders to improve capacity and exploit attractive opportunities that help them overcome unpredictable challenges. Walter (2021) identified that developing and managing dynamic capabilities enables leaders to respond proactively to changing conditions and find innovative and creative strategies that promote sustainable growth. In a complex and unstable environment, leaders of small businesses leverage their dynamic capabilities to drive performance and adapt to change (Hermawati, 2020). In a fiercely competitive environment, developing and managing dynamic capabilities are essential to adjust and reconfigure processes based on the needs of the stakeholders to improve performance, growth, and sustainable competitive advantage (Wendra et al., 2019). Leaders should assess and understand the constructs that affect their dynamic capabilities and identify appropriate strategies to improve them. By focusing on developing their dynamic capabilities, leaders create a strategy to leverage their existing resources and exploit external opportunities to gain access to the knowledge and resources required to remain competitive.

Similar to Argyris's (1976) theory on double-loop learning, developing dynamic capabilities requires innovative change efforts in which leaders must search, identify, develop, integrate, and reconfigure processes to modify and adapt the attitudes, behaviors, and actions through knowledge and resources (Lizarelli et al., 2019). Ferreira et al. (2020) discussed that leaders who view dynamic capabilities as an ongoing strategic process take a proactive approach by learning to effectively modify, integrate, and reintegrate core processes to leverage and develop their capabilities to improve performance. Moreover, similar to the RBV theory (Penrose, 1959, 2009), dynamic capabilities rely on the premise that leaders leverage their tangible and intangible resources to build capabilities and achieve a competitive advantage (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). Bin Hashim et al. (2018) explained how an organization's dynamic capabilities demonstrate the relationship between its resources and performance outcomes. Therefore, leaders who understand how to identify, evaluate, and improve their dynamic capabilities create a strategy that helps them gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Furthermore, leaders of small businesses could use a dynamic capabilities framework to consistently develop and improve their dynamic capabilities, thus promoting innovation and achieving sustainable objectives (Wang et al., 2019). Wang et al. identified that leaders who focus on developing and improving their dynamic capabilities create a culture that encourages commitment and motivation to thrive through constant changes and maintain their competitive position. Leaders who focus on actively developing and improving their dynamic capabilities continuously create value that promotes innovation (Heider et al., 2021). Additionally, Sasmoko et al. (2019) explained that in the age of digital transformation, building dynamic capabilities is essential to acquire the skills, knowledge, and resources to innovate and overcome rapid technological evolutions. Organizational learning is a pillar for leaders to understand how to develop their dynamic capabilities and help them navigate through their digital transformation efforts (Matarazzo et al., 2021). These findings suggest that to remain competitive in a complex and volatile environment, leaders of small businesses should work diligently to develop, implement, monitor, integrate, and reintegrate their dynamic capabilities.

The dynamic capabilities theory supports double-loop learning by conceptualizing the importance of evolution, change, and adaptation to find sustainable solutions to improve processes, capabilities, and capacity. By adapting dynamic capabilities, leaders of small businesses can support innovation and create a culture that influences the behaviors and attitudes to learn and adjust to rapidly changing conditions (Wang et al., 2019). Moreover, by embracing an organizational learning culture (Blaique et al., 2022) and accessing the required resources, knowledge, and skills, leaders of small businesses can develop and leverage their dynamic capabilities to identify gaps, create value, and gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Muhammad & Naz, 2023; Pereira et al., 2021). The dynamic capability theory complements double-loop learning by allowing leaders to identify the strengths and limitations of their capabilities to find strategic solutions to improve processes systematically. Leaders could complete an assessment of their dynamic capabilities to identify gaps and use double-loop learning to develop strategies that promote creativity and innovation and improves overall capacity.

Single- and Double-Loop Learning in Support of Strategic Management

Organizational learning is vital to the survival and success of every organization. Leaders who embrace learning promote the attitudes, behaviors, and mindset to transition from a single- to double-loop learning approach, thus finding sustainable solutions to improve their strategic initiatives. Double-loop learning helps leaders shift their mindset and awareness to acquire, share, and transfer knowledge to successfully plan, implement, and manage their strategic efforts. The following section details how single- and double-loop learning support and impact strategic management, strategic planning, and strategy implementation.

Strategic Management

Globalization and constant technological evolutions create a complex and fiercely competitive market that challenges leaders of small businesses trying to remain competitive. Leaders of small businesses are constantly looking to develop and implement strategies that conform to the market's demands to maintain their competitive position (Prasanna et al., 2019). Furthermore, the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shift in consumer buying preferences behaviors that created additional challenges for leaders of small businesses (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). The strategic management process is a critical process where leaders formulate a plan and identify how to allocate resources to implement their strategy effectively (Dyer et al., 2020). Furthermore, strategic management is a continuous and lengthy process that requires communication, commitment, and willingness to contribute toward achieving the organization's mission and vision.

Effectively developing and implementing a strategic plan is vital for leaders of small businesses to align their efforts with their vision, mission, and strategic objectives, manage performance, adapt to change, and gain a sustainable competitive advantage. Argyris (1990) identified that leaders who strive to achieve organizational excellence must establish an environment and culture that promotes learning, competence, and justice. Chi et al. (2022) discussed that leaders should understand double-loop learning from an adaptative management perspective because it helps them determine how to modify their strategic objectives and decision-making processes based on experiences. Leaders exhibiting single-loop learning repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempt to solve the same business problem by adjusting an action without modifying the system or strategic objective (Chi et al., 2022). On the other hand, leaders exhibiting double-loop learning take a systematic approach to identify and define the problems within the goals and develops corrective, improvement-oriented actions that result in innovative solutions that improve dynamic capabilities. Similarly, Kolawole et al. (2021) explained that double-loop learning is integral to the strategic management process because it allows leaders to identify, understand, and learn to systematically improve processes and adjust strategies to correct errors in the system. The double-loop learning process will enable leaders to assess, modify, and reshape their strategic objectives, thus transforming their business environment and enhancing their dynamic capabilities (Chi et al., 2022; Kolawole et al., 2021). The double-loop learning process allows leaders to evaluate their governing values and adjust systematically improve the strategic design (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Double-loop learning facilitates the organizational learning process for leaders and helps them overcome the challenges of organizational defensive tactics.

Figure 1 demonstrates the impact of single- and double-loop learning and organizational defensive actions on the leadership team’s efforts to systematically improve processes and system designs to enhance performance. Leaders who exhibit defensive behaviors tend to have a victim mentally by taking no accountability for gaps in the organization's system, thereby refusing to learn or modify system processes

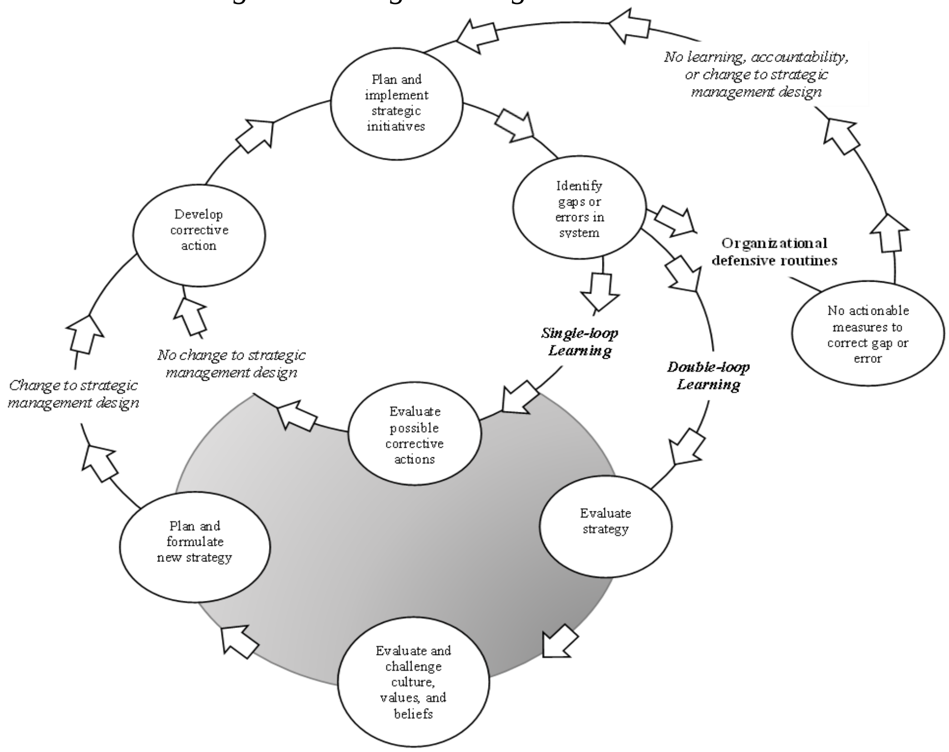
(Argyris, 1990). Leaders who exhibit single-loop learning acknowledge the problem at hand and look for a quick solution without changing the structure or design of the strategic plan (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Burt and Nair (2020) discussed that leaders of single-loop learning could detect errors but cannot effectively correct them because the errors persist. Similarly, Argyris (2007) explained that leaders who attempt to modify actions without evaluating and modifying core constructs would fail to systematically improve their system or only provide a temporary solution to the problem. Single-loop learning allows leaders to modify actions to an existing process without solving the underlying cause of the issue. Moreover, some leaders engage in organizational defensive routines that do not improve systems, structures, and processes.

Sometimes, leaders will avoid learning altogether by engaging in defensive organizational routines. Argyris (1990) discussed how some leaders revert to organizational defensive routines to avoid embarrassment or threats to the organization. Argyris explained that organizational defensive routines prevent leaders from addressing and eliminating the issue. Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2021) identified that leaders who lack knowledge and confidence in their problem-solving abilities are more prone to engage in organizational defensive routines, thus hindering performance and sustainability. Similarly, Comfort et al. (2019) discussed how organizational defensive routines prevent organizational learning and limit communication and knowledge transfer, thus impeding the leadership team’s ability to address issues and adapt to changing environments.

Argyris and Schön (1996) identified that leaders move towards double-loop learning when evaluating the organization's governance and value system and altering the system to design new actions. Burt and Nair (2020) identified that unlearning is the missing link between single and double-loop learning. Leaders who embrace learning and are open to new concepts and ideas are more likely to improve the efficiency of their strategic management processes and improve their existing capabilities (Li et al., 2021**).** Therefore, to implement sustainable change, leaders must embrace a learning environment and be willing to systematically assess their operations, reconfigure their strategic plan, and implement strategies to improve organizational capabilities and performance.

Figure 1

Organizational Learning and Strategic Management



Note. This figure depicts the impact of single- and double-loop learning and organizational defensive routines on a leader's efforts to improve strategic processes. When leaders choose organizational defensive routines, there is no learning; therefore, there is no improvement to the system and its design. The grey circle shows the leader's transition from single-loop to double-loop learning. As leaders transition to a double-loop learning mindset, they question the culture, values, and beliefs, identify opportunities for improvement and systematically change their strategic design to promote sustainable change. Inspired from *Overcoming organizational defenses: Facilitating organizational learning* (p. 94), by C. Argyris, 1990, Allyn and Bacon.

Strategic Planning

Regardless of size, all organizations can benefit from strategic planning. Strategic planning is a widely adopted method that leaders use that contributes to positive performance results (George et al., 2019). Kools and George (2020) identified that the strategic planning process is a collaborative and disciplined effort of the leadership team to identify and evaluate the decisions and actions that will guide the organization's success. Creating a realistic and achievable strategic plan provides leaders with a roadmap to help guide their initiatives and allocate the proper to achieve their strategic goals (Iracy, 2021). Similarly, Winter (2021) discussed how a well-crafted strategic plan acts as a helpful guide for leaders to systematically review their resources and determine a strategy to create value and enhance performance. George et al. (2019) explained that effective strategic planning is an invaluable exercise that helps leaders gain a holistic understanding of their resources and capabilities and find solutions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations, thus enhancing performance and competitive advantage. Strategic planning is essential for leaders to determine the required actions and processes to differentiate themselves from their competitors and increase their market share.

Moreover, organizational learning is vital to strategic planning because leaders must be willing to alter past beliefs and behaviors to gain the strategic foresight required to compete and survive in unstable and disruptive environments (Burt & Nair, 2020). Kools and George (2020) explained how leaders must learn from their failures and successes to formulate and reformulate their strategic initiatives and adapt to rapidly changing environments. These findings highlight the benefits of strategic planning for small business leaders to create a plan to help them achieve their strategic objectives, improve performance, and market share.

Part of the strategic planning process requires leaders to evaluate the strengths and limitations of their resources and capabilities that can impact their efforts to achieve their strategic goals. Leaders transitioning from single to double-loop learning question underlying processes and assumptions to develop new strategic initiatives (Aminoff & Pihlajamaa, 2020). The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is a helpful tool leaders could use to reflect and analyze their surrounding environments and explore resources and opportunities to modify their systems and improve performance. Pereira et al. (2021) identified that leaders should analyze the internal and external factors that could affect performance in the initial phases of strategic planning. The SWOT analysis is a valuable analytical exercise that allows leaders to understand the internal and external factors that could impact performance, thus resulting in better decision-making practices (Hayati et al., 2023). The SWOT analysis is a standard tool business leaders use to understand and leverage their resources by developing and improving their capabilities to create value and promote organizational sustainability.

Furthermore, by completing a SWOT analysis, leaders can assess their current capabilities and determine their readiness to achieve their strategic goals (Dobrović & Furjan, 2020). Additionally, Lin et al. (2021) explained how understanding the strengths and limitations of internal resources allows leaders to allocate and leverage internal resources and exploit external resources to help improve capacity. Using analytical tools like a SWOT analysis supports double-loop learning because it allows leaders to evaluate and reflect on all factors that could impact their strategic planning efforts and learn to uncover effective ways to improve capabilities and performance (Ahmed, 2021). Ultimately, the leadership must identify the strategic tools that allow them to gain a holistic understanding of the factors that could impact performance. Moreover, by embracing an organizational learning environment, leaders create a strategy to leverage their internal capabilities, exploit external opportunities to strengthen their strategic plan and create a guide to help improve performance, growth, and competitiveness.

A leader's willingness to embrace organizational learning to acquire, question, and reformulate strategies could impact their strategic planning efforts. Tsutsui et al. (2022) identified that single-loop learning is insufficient in promoting long-term performance. Leaders cannot employ single-loop learning to develop adequate strategies that modify the behaviors, actions, and systems to adapt and remain competitive in a dynamic environment. Similarly, Li et al. (2021) explained that although single-loop learning can help the workforce yield temporary positive performance outcomes, they do not have the power or insight to modify the strategic plan to promote sustainable change and improve their organizational system. Leaders stuck in single-learning learning cannot understand how to alter their strategic plans to help them develop and strengthen their capabilities (Li et al., 2021). Globocnik et al. (2020) discussed how the strategic planning process is integral for leaders to translate their vision and strategic choices into actionable outcomes that promote innovation and enhance performance. By shifting from single to double-loop learning, leaders can reflect on past experiences to solve transactional problems and modify their governing values to develop new ways of acting and behaving (Tsutsui et al., 2022). Therefore, these findings show that leaders must embrace a learning environment and be willing to shift their mindset to adjust their strategic plan and allow them to improve capabilities and performance and gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Strategy Implementation

The second phase of the strategic management process, the implementation phase, occurs when leaders identify actionable measures that will allow them to execute and implement their strategic plan (Dyer et al., 2020). The leadership team plays an integral role in effectively implementing the organization’s strategic vision (Fuertes et al., 2020). The strategic plan brings little to no value to leaders who cannot put effective strategies in place to implement the plan. Silvestre and Fonseca (2020) identified that the implementation phase is critical to help leaders achieve their strategic goals. Leaders must adequately communicate the plan's details, including each individual's role and responsibilities, to mitigate risks hindering progress and productivity (Silvestre & Fonseca, 2020). Moreover, Kools and George (2020) discussed how leaders should promote a learning culture and provide adequate resources and training to promote professional development and enhance the skills, knowledge, and competencies required to increase commitment and help achieve organizational objectives. Embracing an organizational learning culture and implementing sound strategies to implement the strategic plan encourages creativity, innovation, and collaboration, thus increasing motivation and commitment to achieve strategic goals.

The strategic implementation phase is equally important as the planning and formulation phase. Friesl et al. (2021) identified that leaders face many challenges when implementing their strategic plans. Friesl et al. further identified that some leaders' strategic efforts fail in the implementation phase instead of the planning phase because they cannot transform their strategies into actionable measures to promote change and improve performance. Similarly, Kools and George (2020) explained that although strategic planning helps the leadership team identify the strategies required to promote change and growth, it does not induce or ensure effective implementation. Although many leaders strategize and create an excellent strategic plan, they lack the foresight, analytical skills, and follow-up to provide adequate training, resources, and metrics to track the progress of the implementation plan (Kools & George, 2020). These findings suggested that leaders with foresight, adequate resources, and support are more likely to implement their strategy successfully. A leader's ability to communicate their strategic initiatives and transform them into measurable actions can implement their strategy to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Leaders transitioning from single- to double-loop learning increases the likelihood of identifying adequate modifications to their structures and systems to support strategic efforts, thus improving performance. Leaders will choose how and when to question current practices, challenges current beliefs and governance systems, and learn to help improve their strategic design (Argyris, 1982). Argyris and Schön (1978) explained that adding a second loop in the learning system helps leaders evaluate the problem or gap and identify how to modify their behaviors and practices to find a new approach to integrating sustainable solutions. When implementing their strategic initiatives, leaders who use double-loop learning to examine and re-examine their processes and modify their behaviors and approach to uncover effective ways to improve capabilities and overall efficiency (Carless, 2019). It is integral for leaders to embrace double-loop learning to develop strategic foresight, unlearn ineffective practices and strategies and find sustainable solutions to gain and retain a competitive advantage (Burt & Nair, 2020). Leaders who embrace double-loop learning create learning facilitators by identifying barriers during the implementation process and finding solutions to close gaps and overcome challenges (Li et al., 2021). Therefore, using a double-loop learning approach, organizational learning is vital for leaders to identify how to modify their systems and governance practices to implement improved strategies that promote positive and effective change, thus improving the organization's dynamic capabilities and performance.

Single- and Double-Loop in Support of Organizational Change

All organization leaders must develop and implement effective strategies to evolve and adapt to changing environments and ensure the lasting success of their operations. Single- and double-loop learning helps support leaders through their change initiatives. By embracing a double-loop learning mindset, leaders could challenge their systems of practices, values, and beliefs and uncover new insights that promote sustainable positive change. The following section details the impact of organizational learning on a leader’s change efforts to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Organizational Change

Regardless of their size, leaders of all organizations must find appropriate change management strategies to adjust their practices and adapt to changing business environments. Argyris (2007) explained that leaders must embrace learning to acquire actionable knowledge that uncovers new insight, closes knowledge gaps, and helps leaders modify and improve routines to correct errors in the system. Leaders who embrace double-loop learning evaluate their core systems, including the culture, values, and beliefs, to identify defensive routines that could hinder change efforts (Argyris, 2007). Lukic (2022) discussed that leaders must create a culture of organizational learning that identifies and addresses knowledge and capabilities gaps to promote change. The type of learning required to solve gaps and problems successfully supports Argyris and Schön’s (1996) theory on leadership engaging in double-loop learning by systematically evaluating the foundational practices of each system. Hsu (2021) discussed that leaders must be mindful of the different dimensions of organizational learning and consider how they can leverage learning to improve flexibility and agility, thus facilitating the change process. Ong et al. (2019) identified that leaders who engage their stakeholders to acquire knowledge and learn could identify and create the resources required to enact change and overcome challenges rapidly. Similarly, Franco et al. (2022) explained that organizational learning is pivotal for leaders to improve agility, respond to uncertainties, create value, and gain a sustainable competitive advantage in a complex business environment. Therefore, leaders must carefully evaluate the systems and their core governing values and identify appropriate strategies to encourage learning and facilitate change.

Moreover, a leader's behaviors, attitudes, and willingness to question current practices and embrace a learning environment could impact their abilities as an agent of change to influence the desired behaviors and attitudes of others. Sittrop and Crosthwaite (2021) discussed how as agents of change, leaders must identify and develop strategies that align with the organization's overarching mission, vision, and values. Zavodny Pospisil and Zavodna (2022) explained that leaders promoting change develop a culture that encourages learning, professional development, collaboration, engagement, and performance. Similarly, Yang and Meyer (2019) identified that leaders who embrace change create an environment that is creative, innovative, adaptive, and agile. A leader could adopt different change management models, such as McKinsey's 7S (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and Kotter's eight-step model (Kotter, 1995), to help them navigate the change.

McKinsey's 7S Model. Leaders could use a framework such as McKinsey's 7S model to align their efforts with their mission, vision, and strategic goals. McKinsey's 7S framework supports the theory of double-loop learning. Regardless of size, all organizations must evolve and modify their processes to adapt to changing market conditions. Peters and Waterman (1982) developed the 7S framework because they believed leaders should focus on initiatives that add value to their organizations. Leaders could use the 7S framework to determine how the hard factors: strategy, systems, and structures, and the soft factors: skills, style, staff, and shared values align with the mission, vision, and change efforts (Peters, 2011; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Conducting analyses using the 7S framework could help leaders of small businesses assess their state of operations, identify gaps in the systems that hinder their progress, and develop strategies that align their efforts with the mission and strategic objective. Zavodny Pospisil and Zavodna (2022) identified how there is still a gap in the literature explaining the complexities of female-owned businesses. Zavodny Pospisil and Zavodna explained how the 7S framework is an ideal model for understanding the complexities and challenges of female entrepreneurs in aligning their systems to improve performance and gain a competitive advantage. Leaders of small businesses could use McKinsey's 7S model to understand the needs of the stakeholders and influence the culture, develop, and improve core competencies and soft-skills, and encourage the desired behaviors and attitudes that contribute to positive change.

McKinsey's 7S model supports the Baldrige Excellence Framework (2021) because leaders must evaluate and gain a holistic understanding of the relationship between their systems' core functions and stakeholders. Furthermore, when assessing the core elements of their systems, leaders must ensure that their change efforts align with the organization's mission and strategic vision (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021). By aligning all their systems and subsystems, leaders ensure that their efforts systematically address opportunities for improvement and improve the foundational elements of the organization's design.

Kotter's Eight-Step Model. Kotter's eight-step model is another framework leaders could use to implement their strategic plan. Kotter's (1995) eight-step change model supports Argyris's (1976) double-loop learning by highlighting essential steps to implement change successfully. With rapidly evolving and fiercely competitive markets, organizational leaders face increased pressure to adapt to ensure their survival (Patky, 2020). Kotter (1995, 2012, 2018) modified his eight-step change model over time to consider the evolutions in the industry that leaders should consider when implementing strategic initiatives. The updated model identified how to work towards effective, sustainable change; leaders must redefine processes while engaging employees at all levels of the organization (Kotter, 2018). The improvement to the model allows leaders to work through multiple steps simultaneously to improve the level of employee engagement and empowerment, thus improving motivation, commitment, and productivity in achieving strategic objectives (Laig & Abocejo, 2021). Kuo and Chen (2019) identified that leaders in all organizations, regardless of their size, can benefit from using Kotter's model by finding effective strategies to plan, implement, and manage change efforts. Similarly, Laig and Abocejo (2021) highlighted that using a change management tool like Kotter's eight-step model provides leaders with a strategy to evaluate their current situation, develop, modify, and implement policies and procedures to improve performance and contribute towards positive social change.

The Impact of Single- and Double-Loop Learning on Family-Owned Businesses

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy (2021b), in 2018, family-owned businesses (FOB) represented 29% of small businesses in the United States totaling approximately 9.5 million entities. The dynamics between a leadership team of an FOB are different from nonfamily businesses. The interactions and involvement of family members could promote or hinder their ability to learn, adapt, and promote organizational excellence. The following section defines the criteria of an FOB and how the dynamic between family members could impact learning and performance. Moreover, I also explored the impact of succession planning and FOBs and the relationships and conflicts that could promote or prevent learning and lasting success.

Family-Owned Businesses

An FOB is a business where multiple family members pool their resources and efforts to embark on a business venture together. Combs et al. (2019) discussed how FOBs comprise a reciprocal relationship between the family and business. A business must meet two specific criteria to be considered family-owned: (a) at least two family members hold top management or executive positions and (b) family members must have controlling voting shares of the organization (Lu et al., 2022). The characteristics that distinguish FOBs include ownership structure, leadership and governance, transgenerational succession intention, and corporate identity (Salvato et al., 2019). Amato et al. (2021) identified that family involvement helps shape the organization's identity, which impacts strategic goals and decision-making processes. The structure and interactions between family members influence the behaviors, attitudes, and actions that drive performance and competitiveness (Dyer, 2018). Salvato et al. (2019) explained how it is common for leaders of FOBs to want to maintain control and sustain the core family values that drive their operations.

Another factor that could impact the dynamic of a FOB is the legal structure the owners choose when starting the business. Civelek et al. (2021) discussed that common forms of legal structure for FOBs include sole proprietorships, partnerships, limited liability corporations, and public corporations. In some instances, owners of FOBs may choose to establish an S-Corporation. The S-Corporation is a business structure that qualifies under the Internal Revenue Code, where a shareholder streamlines the business's profits, losses, deductions, and other credits to their personal tax return (Reardon, 2023). Some owners of FOBs may elect to operate as a nonprofit entity. The leader's purpose when operating a nonprofit extends beyond generating a profit and focuses their strategic initiatives on fulfilling a social mission that positively contributes to society (Cabral et al., 2019). Bøhren et al. (2019) explained that family members in FOBs tend to have more control and higher governance positions when the own large stakes in smaller profitable entities. Bøhren et al. further explained that the organization's legal structure and governance systems dictate the family members' identification and level of participation in strategic decision-making processes. Therefore, family members' level of involvement and influence depends on the organization's legal structure.

Moreover, each family member's roles, responsibilities, and level of involvement could vary, influencing the organization's dynamic capabilities (Kotlar & Chrisman, 2019). Similarly, Casillas et al. (2019) explained how the organizational structure and level of involvement significantly impact control and decision-making processes, thus impacting performance. Lu et al. (2022) discussed how the temporal focus of the leadership team could impact their past, present, and future focus, thus impacting their strategic planning efforts. The temporal focus of the leadership team determines the extent of developing an organizational learning culture for the organization (Blaique et al., 2022). Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop learning model highlights how learning and transformation can only occur if the organization leaders have access to the knowledge and resources. The varying levels of involvement of the leadership team and the dynamic capabilities among family members can hinder or leverage their efforts to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Furthermore, the temporal focus of the leadership team could prevent family members from moving beyond single-loop learning by simply adjusting processes in the current system without assessing the need for changes in the design (Argyris, 1982). The level of interaction, communication, and organizational structure contribute to the organization's culture, improving performance, growth, and sustainability (Lu et al., 2022). Each family member plays an integral role in influencing the behaviors and attitudes of others, therefore, impacting nonmonetary objectives such as upholding family values to maintain a positive reputation (Casillas et al., 2019). Soomro et al. (2021) identified that a leader's ability to improve their capabilities depends on their environment and ability to adaptively learn and adjust to changing situations. Similarly, Latham (2016) discussed the critical role of the leadership team in promoting a learning environment required to acquire the capabilities and resources to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. Leaders of FOBs take pride in their family roots, thus vested in the well-being of their employees and communities, making them an employer of choice and creating a competitive advantage (Salvato et al., 2019). These findings suggested that organizations, where the leadership team comprises family members have a different dynamic than nonfamily businesses. Moreover, each family member influences others, which could improve or impede organizational learning and progression toward achieving strategic objectives.

Additionally, leaders of FOBs must determine how they will manage change and challenges to improve resilience and sustainability. Salvato et al. (2020) identified that FOBs develop and maintain high levels of resilience, thus capable of exploiting opportunities from postcrisis threats. Similarly, Lin and Wen (2021) discussed how FOBs have a competitive advantage because family members focus on resilience rather than rapid growth. Through increased resilience, leaders of FOBs tend to be agile, thus capable of rapidly adapting to changing circumstances (Lin & Wen, 2021; Salvato et al., 2020). The increase in resilience and adaptability to change indicates double-loop learning tendencies. By exploiting knowledge, capabilities, and resources, leaders of FOBs can transform their systems by developing adaptive strategies and reconfiguring their processes to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Hernández-Linares et al., 2021). Therefore, leaders of FOBs who embrace double-loop learning can use their critical-thinking and analytical skills to determine how to gain access to the knowledge, capabilities, and resources to systematically improve their processes and thrive.

Succession Planning in Family-Owned Businesses. Succession planning is a critical factor that could hinder an FOB’s ability to facilitate leadership transition between generations. Batool et al. (2022) discussed how succession planning is a necessary strategic process where the leaders of an organization create, adapt, and manage strategies to provide the next generation of leaders with the knowledge, resources, and mentorship to transition successfully into their future roles. Similarly, Farah and Li (2022) identified that leaders should not overlook succession planning because it provides a blueprint to attract and retain candidates who will fill the future leadership gap. Although succession planning is critical to the success and sustainability of an organization, many leaders of small businesses lack the proper strategies to identify and train their future successors (Farah & Li, 2022). Many factors could contribute to failed succession planning efforts, such as lack of mentorship, inadequate training and development, poor leadership and governance, distant relationships, and insufficient communication (Fuentes, 2020). These findings highlighted the importance of implementing adequate processes and procedures to identify and train the next generation of leaders to ensure the organization’s lasting success. Leaders who develop a comprehensive succession plan and implement adequate communication strategies support transparency, direction, and guidance to prepare the next generation of leaders.

Succession planning for FOBs is crucial to help facilitate the intergenerational transition of leadership (Fava, 2022). The leaders must involve the successor early to help them develop and evolve into their new roles; otherwise, they may face pushback for promoting someone without adequate qualifications. Leaders of FOB must view succession planning as a continuous long-term process that requires the support of all family members who hold a leadership position in the organization (Buckman et al., 2020). Leaders who manage succession planning in FOBs could face uneasy emotions and resistance because of personal bias when selecting a successor (Arambhan &

Seetharaman, 2022). FOBs typically have unique cultures firmly rooted in the family's history and values (Arambhan & Seetharaman, 2022). Arambhan and Seetharaman (2022) identified that the organizational culture of FOBs is an extension of the family home and influences the attitudes and behaviors that influence decision-making processes.

Moreover, it is common for the leader of an organization to want to maintain control of the organization through a family member after their retirement. Fava (2022) identified how leaders should carefully craft, manage and communicate a strategy to safeguard the best interest of the stakeholders and promote sustainable practices. Communication is integral for leaders to share the knowledge, requirements, expectations, and vision for the organization moving forward. Leaders must diligently monitor, revise, and review their succession plan regularly to ensure the strategies remain appropriate and contribute towards preparing employees to transition into leadership roles. In FOBs, leaders must be transparent and identify in detail the strategies that help support a smooth transition of power.

An essential consideration that could impact succession planning in FOBs is potential conflicts between family members. Strong cognitive, structural, and relational ties between the leader and family member successor help promote flexibility, agility, and sustainability (Bokhari et al., 2020). To facilitate and ensure a successful transition between leaders when the successor participates in succession planning efforts and gains the knowledge, skills, and competencies to help the organization continuously achieve its strategic objectives. Arambhan and Seetharaman (2022) also identified that adequate training, mentorship, and oversight are conducive to fostering a trusting and positive relationship that helps ensure a sustainable future. The active participation of all individuals is integral to supporting the successor and predecessor’s collaboration, commitment, motivation, engagement, and commitment to help achieve the succession plan. Additionally, leaders must ensure adequate processes are in place and provide the support required to help the successor gain the knowledge, competencies, and capabilities to successfully transition into the leadership role.

Relationships and Conflicts in Family-Owned Businesses. All business leaders sometimes face conflicts and challenges, and FOBs with excellent family dynamics are not immune. Conflicts could arise for various reasons, such as ambiguity of roles, disagreements in decision-making processes, sibling rivalry, and deviant behaviors and attitudes (Combs et al., 2019). If left unresolved, such conflicts could create rifts between family members, reducing family harmony and negatively impacting performance. Salvato et al. (2019) identified that it is common for leaders of FOBs to want to uphold family control. The need for family members to sustain power could cause conflicts. Fuad et al. (2019) explained how sibling rivalry is a significant challenge during succession planning efforts. These authors highlighted factors that could affect the synergy of FOBs. Some leaders will cede power or control to avoid conflicts and maintain amicable relationships with family members. On the other hand, other leaders have difficulties relinquishing power, thus limiting other leaders' abilities to make decisions regarding the organization’s strategic direction.

Engaging the next generation of successors is integral to ensuring the success and continuity of the FOB (Garcia et al., 2019). The interactions and dynamics could create conflicts and substantially impact the successful transition between leaders. Weak and conflicting relationships between family members could diminish strategic planning efforts and negatively impact performance and competitiveness (Umans et al., 2021). Salvato et al. (2019) identified that FOBs with transgenerational family members could cause conflicts because of differing views and ideas regarding the organization's future direction. Embracing a learning environment, communication, commitment, and a collective willingness to work together (Quansah & Hartz, 2021) is integral to working through the conflict to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Fuad et al. (2019) also identified that potential conflicts could arise when multiple family members are heirs to the FOB. Leaders should carefully assess the intentions of their successors to understand the risks, behaviors, and attitudes that will impact performance (Chen et al., 2019). Chen et al. explained how improperly managing sibling rivalry could lead to aggressive tactics and poor decision-making strategies, which could hinder the continuity and success of the organization. Moreover, the different levels of passion and commitment between family members could cause disparities and impact their intention to stay and contribute to the organization’s long-term success (Dyer, 2018). Successors who share the same vision of the organization's future will work diligently to maintain a productive environment conducive to improving performance and sustainability (Chen et al., 2019; Fuad et al., 2019). Leaders of FOBs should put processes in place and clearly communicate their expectations relative to succession planning efforts. Clearly stating their expectations on the organization's future direction could help avoid unpleasant conflict between organization leaders. Additionally, taking a proactive approach to succession planning could help leaders optimize the efficiency of their succession plan by integrating strategies based on the desires and expectations of each family member.

Transition

In Section 1, I provided a comprehensive overview of the foundational components of this doctoral study, including the background of the problem, problem and purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance of the study. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies leaders of small businesses used to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Moreover, I critically reviewed academic and professional literature to support my research question and conceptual framework. I adopted Argyris’s (1976) single- and double-loop learning theory as the conceptual framework and lens through which I viewed the business problem.

In Section 2, I reintegrate the purpose of the study and communicate the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, and ethical considerations. I also discuss the data collection instruments, techniques, and analysis used and how I achieved reliability and validity for this doctoral study. I describe how I collected data from my participants using semistructured interviews, and collected archival data, public data, and scholarly literature to understand the strategies leaders of small businesses used to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

In Section 3, I use the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) as a guide to provide a detailed report based on the research requirements of the DBA consulting capstone. I follow the criteria established in the Baldrige Excellence Framework to create an organizational profile and complete a systematic and holistic understanding of my client organization (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). The key areas covered in Section 3 include the organizational profile and seven key sections for analysis, including (a) leadership; (b) strategy; (c) customers; (d) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; (e) workforce; (f) operations; and (g) results. I summarize the findings, key themes, and contributions toward favorable business practices and positive social change. Lastly, I offer recommendations based on identified opportunities for improvement and suggestions for future research.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The target population comprised three leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States who successfully implemented strategies to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The implications for positive social change include the potential for leaders of small businesses to implement strategies that promote a productive work environment to grow and thrive in their industries. Moreover, female leaders of successful small businesses can potentially promote positive social change by becoming role models for women and girls in their communities.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher for this qualitative single case study, I was the primary data collection instrument. The researcher has a complex and integral role in gathering data from the study's participants (Collins & Stockton, 2022). Hamilton and Finley (2020) noted that to understand the complexities of the phenomenon, the researcher must explore, understand, describe, interpret, and explain the meaning of collected data. Amongst the many forms of data collection tools in qualitative research, it is common for the researcher to be one of the primary data collection instruments (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020). I collected information from participants by asking open-ended questions during semistructured interviews. During the preparation process, it was essential to identify appropriate interview techniques to encourage interview participation (McGrath et al., 2019).

Moreover, Yin (2018) explained how collecting sufficient and appropriate data requires the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, be a good listener, avoid bias, and ethically conduct research. To ensure ethical compliance, I followed the guidelines of the *Belmont Report* (Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1979) to ensure respect for the participant, justice, and beneficence. The need to act with honesty and integrity and respect the rights of the participants was especially critical due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the information. I completed a service order agreement that outlined the details, such as online interactions, outcomes, deliverables, additional services, time requirements, and length of engagement. I presented the service order agreement to the leader of my client organization for their review and approval. I emailed participants a consent form to obtain their permission to proceed with the interview. Additionally, all participants volunteered to participate in this qualitative single case study and had the right to withdraw at any time.

A researcher must consider how their relationship with the topic, participants, or research area could affect their study and its findings. I had no knowledge or experience relative to the nature of my client leaders' industry or their operations. I did not know the participants before the start of the research project. I used my expertise in business and accounting and the rich body of knowledge I gained throughout my doctoral studies to bring my client leader a fresh perspective in finding creative solutions to their business problem.

Furthermore, the IRB is a federally mandated body in which the board members have an integral role in reviewing and monitoring research practices and ensuring the protection of research participants' rights (Lapid et al., 2019). To ensure that I followed proper ethical procedures and protected the rights of my participants, I completed the human subjects training and obtained IRB approval (no. 08-02-22-1153868) before commencing the data collection process. Per the IRB criteria for DBA Consulting Capstone students, I respected the rights of the participants. I collected data using the preapproved list of data sources, including semistructured interviews, archival and public data, and scholarly literature.

Another important consideration as a researcher is mitigating the risk of bias and prejudice. As the researcher, the best strategy to help identify and address biases is acknowledging the possibility they exist (Arfuch et al., 2021). It is impossible to eliminate bias; therefore, it is essential to identify potential intentional and unintentional biases that could impact my study. The researcher may experience implicit bias resulting from subconscious attitudes and behaviors based on past knowledge and experiences (De Houwer, 2019). A second form of bias is the social desirability bias that could occur if participants answer questions based on what they believe is socially acceptable (Bergen & Labonté, 2019).

Additionally, Johnson et al. (2020) explained how the researcher might encounter personal biases because of body language, tone of voice, attire, social status, or culture. As the researcher, I strove to ensure the proper safeguards to reduce the risk of bias to an acceptable level. Reflective journals help the researcher increase their levels of self-awareness and self-regulation (Alt & Raichel, 2020). I used a reflective journal as a strategy to improve my self-awareness, allowing me to reflect on and self-regulate my attitudes, behaviors, and actions throughout the research process.

Furthermore, using appropriate interview protocols and multiple data sources to achieve triangulation will help minimize potential bias (Yin, 2018). According to Yin, member checking is another effective method to help mitigate the risk of bias and validate the authenticity of the information collected. Throughout the research process, I remained conscious of potential biases and worked diligently to mitigate them by supporting my research with multiple data sources. Additionally, I conducted semistructured interviews with the only client leaders from whom I obtained written consent. Using the interview protocol (see Appendix A), I sought to collect data at a convenient time and manner for the participants.

Participants

DBA Consulting Capstone administrators pair research scholars selected for the consulting capstone project with an organization. The leaders of the participating organization underwent a detailed selection process to ensure that they were a good fit for the consulting capstone program. Using the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) as a guide, I embarked on a suggested 40-week term plan to build a relationship with the participants. I completed a holistic assessment of the organization's performance. Per IRB requirements, the participants voluntarily signed consent forms to participate in the study. Participants for this study included three senior leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States. I acted in good faith and collaborated with the participants to agree on a realistic timeline to achieve milestones, submit appropriate deliverables, obtain client approval, and submit the final report.

I communicated with my participants via text message, email, and Zoom calls to foster and maintain a trusting and productive relationship. I conducted all interviews and communications via virtual tools because of the geographic distance between myself and my client organization. During the initial weeks of the consulting capstone, I established a relationship with my client organization; I introduced myself via email and telephone and described the value I could offer to their organization. I communicated only with individuals who gave me a signed copy of the consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the study. I reminded prospective participants of their rights to decline to answer questions, the confidentiality of their answers, and to withdraw at any point.

Research Method and Design

The consulting capstone doctoral study offers research scholars an opportunity to leverage their knowledge and skills and collaborate with a client organization to help solve a business problem. My role as a scholar consultant was to complete a qualitative single case study by collecting multiple sources of data from leaders of one organization. The problem and purpose statement and research question laid the foundation for the research method and design choice.

Research Method

Research scholars can choose a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method approach to complete their doctoral study. Yin (2018) identified that a researcher must carefully select the method based on the study's objectives. Similarly, Basias and Pollalis

(2018) discussed that the quality of the study depends on the researcher's ability to select the method that aligns with the research goals. A researcher conducting a qualitative study seeks to understand, interpret, and explain the complexities of a phenomenon (Lenger, 2019). Moreover, by embracing a more subjective approach, the researcher uses a qualitative method to gain knowledge of their participants' perceptions and experiences of a business phenomenon (Johnson et al., 2020). According to Schreurs et al. (2022), qualitative research helps the researcher gain a more holistic understanding of the participants' experience that is unobtainable through quantitative research. Similarly, Matta (2019) explained how a researcher would choose a qualitative method and select appropriate data collection techniques to gain a rich insight into the participants' experiences. As a scholar consultant registered in the consulting capstone, I identified that a qualitative method was most appropriate to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses used to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

The focal point of quantitative research is collecting objective, quantifiable data to understand the relationship between a set of independent and dependent variables. A researcher could choose a quantitative method when the goal is to objectively collect data to identify relationships between variables (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Basias and Pollalis (2018) explained how the data collection techniques in quantitative research allow the researcher to conveniently collect large volumes of data while mitigating the risks of personal bias. Additionally, researchers using a quantitative method embrace a positivist philosophy to examine and uncover the cause-and-effect relationship among variables

(Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019). A quantitative method was inappropriate for this study because the research objectives were not to collect and analyze objective data to understand the relationship among a set of known variables.

Mixed method research allows the researcher to use quantitative and qualitative data-collection techniques to comprehensively understand a business phenomenon (Dawadi et al., 2021). By collecting a blend of subjective and objective data, the researcher creates a hypothesis, examines relationships, and supplements their findings by gaining insight into the participants' lived experiences (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). Similarly, Yin (2018) explained how the mixed method is advantageous for a researcher who desires to strengthen quantitative results and increase the validity and reliability of their findings. A mixed method was inappropriate for this study because the objective was not to supplement objective quantitative research with qualitative data collection techniques.

Research Design

For this qualitative study, I selected a single case study design to explore the strategies leaders of small business use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. A case study approach is a typical qualitative design researchers use to explore and understand a particular business phenomenon (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Yin (2018) described how case study research is advantageous to gain a comprehensive understanding of a specific case and significant insight into the topic of study. The scope of a qualitative single case study is to rigorously investigate a complex phenomenon of which the boundaries may not be explicitly clear (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Stake (2010) explained that a researcher's goal in case study research is to understand the failures and successes of business leaders' strategies by gaining rich insight into the complexities of human experiences. Case study research is advantageous for researchers who desire to understand the what, why, and how of a business phenomenon (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). Conducting a qualitative case study allows the researcher to focus on exploring, uncovering, and understanding the complexities of a specific business phenomenon.

There are other qualitative designs a researcher could choose when completing their study. For instance, a researcher could choose a phenomenological approach. The goal of a phenomenological design is to explore and interpret a phenomenon through participants' lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). According to Frechette et al. (2020), selecting a phenomenological design allows researchers to capture raw, authentic data from their participants' perceptions and lived experiences. Phenomenological studies generally take more time to complete than case study research because of the level of planning and preparation to conduct lengthy interviews and observations to collect sufficient data to understand the experiences of multiple individuals who lived the same phenomenon (Creswell & Crewsell Baex, 2020). The phenomenological design was inappropriate for this study because my goal was not to gain insight into the problem by understanding the meanings of perceptions of participants’ lived experiences.

A researcher could also choose an ethnographic research design. An ethnographic research design is beneficial for researchers who seek to understand how behaviors, attitudes, interactions, and culture impact an organization's performance (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Similarly, Vom Lehn (2019) explained how an ethnographic design is suitable when the researcher wants to study the values, social constructs, attitudes, behaviors, and actions within a specific group. Vom Lehn identified that an ethnographic design is appropriate to understand how organizational culture influences operational processes and performance. The ethnographic design was unsuitable for this study because researching the business phenomenon's cultural events, behaviors, and attitudes was not conducive to answering the overarching research question.

Data saturation is integral in qualitative research to help the researcher ensure the reliability and validity of their findings. Hayashi et al. (2019) discussed how validity and reliability enhance the credibility and quality of a qualitative study and are integral in obtaining final approval from the doctoral committee. Researchers select rigorous research techniques, such as using multiple sources of evidence to enhance the validity and reliability of the study's findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Denzin (2017) explained that a researcher could help achieve saturation through triangulation by using multiple sources of evidence to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, Rashid et al. (2019) identified that using multiple sources of evidence allows researchers to gain a rich and holistic understanding of the phenomenon and achieve triangulation and saturation. I used different techniques to ensure data saturation for this qualitative case study. I conducted a semistructured with three leaders from a small for-profit organization. I relied on member validation and data triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the findings and enhance the study's reliability, validity, and quality.

Population and Sampling

Selecting an appropriate population and sample size is integral to a researcher's approaches to gathering sufficient, credible evidence that contributes to a high-quality doctoral study. Researchers analyze and identify an appropriate sample size because it is unfeasible to study an entire population (Andrade, 2020). The time, resources, and costs of studying an entire population are unattainable for many researchers (Saunders et al., 2018). A researcher must carefully evaluate and identify an appropriate sample size to gather rich insight into the business phenomenon and answer the research question (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The Walden University DBA Consulting Capstone administrators pair independent scholars selected for the program with a client organization. The population for this qualitative single case study comprised three senior leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States. The leaders of this small for-profit organization developed and implemented strategies to enhance organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

An important consideration when assessing the population and sample is selecting the most appropriate sampling method based on the research objectives. Yin (2016) discussed that to strengthen the study's credibility, a researcher must choose a sample that provides generalizable and transferable results and contributes to the research field. Additionally, when completing a doctoral study with a smaller sample size, the researcher must be prepared to justify why the selected sample size is adequate to gather sufficient evidence and satisfy the research requirements (Yin, 2016). Based on the objectives of this qualitative case study, I selected the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling, a form of nonprobability sampling, is adequate for researchers who want to gather data from participants with knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon (Ames et al., 2019). Yin (2016) and Ames et al. (2019) described how purposive sampling is typical in qualitative research because the researchers want to deliberately choose their sample to gain rich data that strengthens the credibility and quality of the study. Additionally, Yin (2018) identified that purposive sampling is appropriate for case study research because the researcher could deliberately choose the participants who will provide valuable insight contributing to the quality of the findings. Therefore, I selected three senior leaders with power and influence to make strategic decisions to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Independent scholars must gather sufficient data when conducting research to ensure data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the researcher is satisfied there is enough data to replicate the study, and additional data would not uncover new themes or insights (Saunders et al., 2018). Researchers who use a purposive sampling method in qualitative research rely on data saturation guiding principles to identify a sufficient sample size to achieve data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Mwita (2022) discussed how the researcher must consider multiple factors such as sample size, length of data collection sessions relevancy of participants that could impact saturation to enhance the reliability and validity of the study. Similarly, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) and Moser and Korstjens (2018) identified that sample sizes vary between studies, and larger sample sizes do not automatically ensure data saturation. Ultimately, the researcher should select an appropriate sample size to holistically understand the business phenomenon and gain robust insight to achieve data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Based on the purpose and objective of my research, I determined that using a sample of three senior leaders from a small for-profit organization was sufficient to achieve data saturation.

I used purposive sampling to select three client leaders to achieve data saturation. I conducted semistructured interviews in which each senior leader engaged with me in member checking to ensure the validity and reliability of responses. I used open-ended and probing questions to encourage participants to provide as much detail on their experiences as possible. Yin (2018) identified that researchers use semistructured interviews when conducting qualitative research to ask personal and probing questions about the participants' experiences. McGrath et al. (2019) identified how researchers must adequately prepare and find an appropriate interview setting to encourage participants to contribute rich insight into the business phenomenon. Because of the distance between myself and the participants, I found flexible and convenient solutions to conduct interviews. Digital platforms such as Zoom were a convenient and flexible outlet for conducting semistructured interviews and collecting data (Archibald et al., 2019). Additionally, I collected data from other sources, such as archival and public data, until I was satisfied that new information did not reveal new concepts or themes.

Ethical Research

There are many ethical considerations when conducting qualitative research. Researchers completing a qualitative case study should proceed diligently and ensure rigor by upholding high ethical standards (Yin, 2018). As a scholar consultant in the DBA Consulting Capstone program and a contributor to the research field, I had an obligation to use appropriate and ethical data collection techniques. In preparation for beginning the consulting capstone project, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative human rights course. I followed the ethical guidelines of the *Belmont Report* (Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1979) to help protect the participants' rights. Furthermore, before collecting data from the participant, I obtained IRB approval (no. 08-02-22-1153868). The IRB is a federally mandated entity that works diligently with researchers to protect participant rights (Lapid et al., 2019). Once I obtained IRB approval, I created a service order agreement outlining the researcher's and the participants' expectations, roles, and responsibilities. After being vetted by Walden University, my client leader signed a research agreement (see Appendix C) to participate in this doctoral study.

I also obtained written consent from the participants before collecting any data, per the recommendation of Saunders et al. (2015). As Xu et al. (2020) and Klykken (2022) discussed, informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical research for it helps foster a trusting relationship between the researcher and the participant. The researcher seeks to obtain informed consent from the participant to reassure them that participation is voluntary and that they always have the right to withdraw from the research study (see Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1979; Pietilä et al., 2020). Participants can voluntarily engage in a study once they understand the requirements for engagement, time commitment, and so forth. I emailed my participants a form to obtain their consent before proceeding with the interviews. The senior leaders consented to participate in the semistructured interviews by reviewing my email and replying, “I consent.”

The senior leaders of the client organization understood that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right not to answer questions or withdraw from the study if they no longer wished to participate. There were no monetary incentives for participating; however, a client organization that chose to participate in the consulting capstone doctoral study received free consulting services to help them identify areas of improvement to improve their business practices. I used the consulting capstone proposed 40-week timeline to collaborate with the leaders of my client organization and gain a holistic understanding of their operations to help them find sustainable solutions to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

The ethical guidelines of the *Belmont Report* (Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1979) help protect participants' rights, including safeguarding their confidentiality and the chain of evidence required to complete the study. A key consideration for researchers is establishing processes to protect the participant's privacy and confidentiality. To protect the identity of my client organization, I used the pseudonym "NK" and redacted all information with identifiers from the data collected, including interview transcripts. To protect the identity of the participants, I used the coding "P1", "P2", and "P3" when coding the interview transcripts. I will store the data collected from this study for 5 years on an encrypted hard drive, including Zoom recordings and transcriptions.

Furthermore, I will store all printed documents, notes, and files in a locked filing cabinet. To protect the confidentiality of my client organization, 5 years following the completion date of my doctoral study, I will permanently delete all electronic files, documents, notes, and transcriptions from the encrypted hard drive. Additionally, I will destroy all paper documents, including notes and files, after 5 years using a cross shredder.

Data Collection Instruments

Collecting sufficient, appropriate, and relevant data is integral to completing a high-quality doctoral dissertation. When conducting qualitative case study research, it is common for the researcher to be the primary data collection instrument (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020). I served as the primary data-collection instrument for this study. Yin (2018) identified four principles of data collection to help ensure the study's quality, validity, and reliability. Yin discussed how the first principle of data collection is collecting data through multiple sources of evidence. Gathering data from multiple sources allows the researcher to gain critical insight and a holistic understanding of the business problem (Colvin, 2022). Considering the complexities of the business environment, gathering data through multiple sources of evidence allows the researcher to use a rigorous approach to investigate the business phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Researchers could use different data collection instruments when conducting qualitative research, such as semistructured interviews, field notes, observations, focus groups, archival data, and public data (Denzin, 2017; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). I conducted semistructured interviews with three senior leaders from my client organization to gather data for this study. I collected archival and public data and reviewed scholarly literature to gain insight into the strategies leaders of small businesses used to enhance performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Semistructured interviews are a standard data collection technique in qualitative research in which the researcher prepares open-ended questions to encourage discussions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Open-ended and probing questions allow participants to share rich insight into their experiences regarding the business phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Lobe et al. (2020) identified that in the era of social distancing, many researchers now rely on technological platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams to conduct their interviews.

Because of the geographical distance between myself and the participants, we used Zoom to facilitate the interviews. Before the interview, the participants received an informed consent form via email and replied, “I consent,” thus agreeing to participate in the study. At the beginning of the interview, I thanked the participant for their time and reminded them of the confidentiality agreement and their right to refuse to answer questions. Additionally, I requested permission to record the interview to obtain transcripts. I asked the participants open-ended questions to encourage a rich and meaningful discussion. I followed the interview protocols (see Appendix A) by taking notes and transcribing the data collected promptly. In addition to the interviews, I collected archival data from my client organization. I used the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) assessment tool to help me structure my interview question and gain a holistic view of the organization’s systems.

There are various techniques I used to help enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection processes. Member checking is a strategy to verify the accuracy of the data collected (Stahl & King, 2020). Additionally, providing participants with a copy of the transcripts and allowing them to confirm or adjust their comments is an excellent strategy to reduce bias and increase validity and reliability (Busetto et al., 2020). Based on the objective of my research and the chosen data collection instruments, I used member checking to ensure I accurately recorded participant experiences. I gave the participants a copy of the transcripts for validation and removed any inaccurate or retracted comments.

Data Collection Technique

I collected data through semistructured interviews, archival documents, public data, and scholarly literature for this qualitative single case study. Semistructured interviews are a typical data collection technique for qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Yin, 2018). Similarly, Bloomfield and Fisher (2019) identified semistructured interviews as an effective data collection technique to gain rich context into a business phenomenon. I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to conduct semistructured interviews with three leaders of a small FOB in the Northeastern region of the United States.

Before commencing interviews, I obtained informed consent from all participants. Due to geographical constraints, I scheduled the interviews via Zoom. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself and reviewed the interview process's details. I reminded participants of their rights to refuse to answer questions or withdraw their participation at any time. I asked the participants' permission to record the session to assist me in transcribing the responses following the interview. I actively listened and looked for verbal and nonverbal cues. I asked open-ended questions, clarified, or reworded certain questions, and asked probing questions to encourage participants to provide rich insight into the business phenomenon. I respected the agreed-upon interview time and thanked the participants before ending the Zoom call.

There are notable advantages and disadvantages of using semistructured interviews to collect data. Conducting a semistructured interview is advantageous because it allows the researcher to guide the interview process and allows participants time to answer questions (Yin, 2018). Additionally, researchers can ask follow-up questions to clarify participant responses or gain additional insight (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015). Although semistructured interviews help researchers gather insightful data, they must be mindful of the potential limitations. For example, participants could misinterpret the question, responses could be biased, and participants may not accurately recall the events surrounding the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Additionally, participant answers are subjective and based on their perceptions and recollections, which could result in inaccurate responses.

In addition to semistructured interviews, I collected archival documents and public data to gather evidence that strengthened my research. The leaders of my client organization shared organizational documents, such as promotional materials, business plans, financial projections, and other relevant documents, via email. I collected public data though my client organization’s website and social media platforms. I also collected data by researching my client organization's competitors' websites and social media platforms. Furthermore, I collected performance benchmark data from websites such as Hoover’s database, McKinsey’s, and Statista.

I did not conduct a pilot study following IRB approval. I focused on adequately preparing for the interview process by planning and refining the interview questions that would allow me to gather the data required to answer the research question. I used member checking to validate the accuracy of the participant responses. Stahl and King (2020) identified that member checking is a strategy to verify participant responses' accuracy, thus enhancing the validity and reliability of the study’s findings. I transcribed the participant responses promptly and shared a copy of the transcripts to validate the accuracy of the answers. Yin (2018) discussed how allowing participants to revise and modify their responses contributes to gathering more accurate results. Participants reviewed the transcripts and identified any changes required to clarify or correct statements made during the interview.

Data Organization Techniques

A researcher must create a strategy to organize the vast amount of data collected during the research process. Yin (2018) identified two fundamental data collection principles: creating a database, organizing documents, and maintaining a chain of evidence. Maintaining a proper chain of evidence is an excellent strategy for organizing, categorizing, and identifying when data saturation occurs (Verleye, 2019). I utilized various tools to collect and organize data for this study, such as a literature review search log, citation software, reflecting journals, and labeling systems. The literature review log allowed me to keep track of my keyword search history. Using the citation software EndNote, I categorized all scholarly articles by topic.

I maintained a handwritten reflection journal to document notes and observations from participant interviews. Researchers use a reflection journal to increase self-awareness, assess personal assumptions, identify potential biases, uphold transparency, and organize data into themes (Alt & Raichel, 2020). I uploaded all handwritten notes electronically on a secure hard drive. Additionally, I created a folder on a secure hard drive where I saved all digital copies of interview transcripts. To protect the identity of my client organization, I used the pseudonym "NK" and redacted all information with identifiers from the data collected, including interview transcripts. To protect the identity of the participants, I used the coding "P1", "P2", and "P3" when coding the interview transcripts. I will store the data collected from this study on an encrypted hard drive for 5 years. To protect the confidentiality of my client organization, I will destroy the hard drive's contents in its entirety after 5 years.

Data Analysis

An essential consideration for researchers is identifying an appropriate data analysis process based on the research design. A researcher must determine how they will gather sufficient credible evidence to achieve triangulation (Yin, 2018). Triangulation is essential in research because gathering evidence from one source is insufficient to gain a holistic understanding of a business phenomenon (Patton, 1999). A researcher who achieved triangulation gathered rich insight through multiple sources of evidence to explain the research question (Noble & Heale, 2019). There are four data triangulation methods for qualitative studies: data, investigator, theory, and methodological (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 1999; Yin, 2018). Denzin (2017) discussed how methodological triangulation is typical in qualitative research because many researchers use multiple sources of data, such as semistructured interviews, observations, field notes, and focus groups, to collect sufficient data to achieve saturation. Methodological triangulation allows researchers to use multiple data sources to strengthen their results and support their findings, thus increasing the validity and reliability of the study (Yin, 2018). Therefore, I determined that the methodological triangulation approach is appropriate for the data analysis. I collected data from multiple sources of evidence, such as semistructured interviews, archival documents, public documents such as performance outcomes, and public websites.

Following each interview, I promptly transcribed the articles and saved them on a secure external hard drive. After completing the member-checking process, I manually coded the interview transcripts. I used Yin’s (2018) five-step thematic approach to collect data: (a) compile the data, (b) disassemble the data, (c) reassemble the data, (d) interpret the data, and (e) draw conclusions about the data. Saunders et al. (2015) explained how it is typical for researchers conducting a qualitative study to select an inductive, thematic approach to analyze the data from their transcripts to uncover themes and patterns. Similarly, Yin (2018) identified that during the coding phase, researchers identify patterns, themes, and relationships in the data to find answers to the research question. I selected a thematic approach to analyze the transcript data. I used color coding to help capture the key themes that will help answer the research question.

Because I chose to code my transcripts manually, it was essential to consider which data coding technique was the most appropriate to help me uncover the key themes and relationships within the data. Saldana (2021) discussed how generic coding techniques benefit novice researchers. Saldana identified that a researcher could use an NVivo coding method to identify words and phrases that help capture the participant's perception of the phenomenon. Similarly, Raskind et al. (2019) explained how researchers could use NVivo coding to identify words highlighting participants' experiences. During the first cycle of NVivo coding, the researcher must highlight the exact wording useful in the second cycle (Saldana, 2021). During the first cycle of NVivo coding, I used colors to identify key words and short phrases that could provide insight into the research question.

During the second cycle of NVivo coding, the researcher will cluster keywords and phrases to uncover themes (Saldana, 2021). Saunders et al. (2015) discussed how clustering codes help the researcher identify relationships between codes identified in the first coding cycle. After carefully revising the codes from the first cycle of NVivo coding, I clustered the data into smaller groups. I continued to recluster the data to develop more focused themes that provided rich insight into the research question. Yin (2018) explained how researchers should correlate their themes to their conceptual framework and literature review to ensure the rigor and quality of the doctoral study. I compared all themes to Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop learning theory to obtain a holistic understanding of the business phenomenon. Additionally, I referenced the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), the participants' organizational profile, and archival and public data to gain a systematic understanding of strategies leaders of small businesses used to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

I analyzed my client organization's archival documents to identify routines, strengths, and opportunities for improvement. Saunders et al. (2015) discussed how a researcher could analyze archival data to uncover patterns, routines, and processes. Therefore, analyzing my client leader's archival documents allowed me to discover patterns and themes in my client organization's strategies and processes. Like coding the interview transcripts, I analyzed the data, identified words and phrases, clustered the words into themes, reclustered the data, and interpreted the data to gain rich insight into the research question. Furthermore, I analyzed public documents by identifying performance metrics and comparing them to those of my client organization. Analyzing performance metrics helped me gain insight into my client organization's performance compared to its competitors.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Establishing reliability is integral to ensuring the quality of a doctoral study. Hayashi et al. (2019) identified that enhancing the reliability of qualitative research is critical to having the study approved by the doctoral committee. A researcher's process of replicating the study through protocols and data collection techniques helps increase the study's reliability (Quintão et al., 2020). Similarly, Rose and Johnson (2020) explained how achieving reliability depends on the researcher's ability to use a consistent research approach with other qualitative studies. Yin (2018) discussed how researchers who achieve reliability establish clear methodologies and processes that other researchers could duplicate and arrive at the same conclusions. Like Yin (2018), Rose and Johnson

(2020) identified that reliability refers to the researcher's use of consistent methodological processes that remain stable across time, different researchers, and doctoral studies. The consistency and clarity of the systematic processes used to conduct research allow other researchers to replicate the analysis using the described research methods (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I planned, identified, and implemented clear methodologies, protocols, and processes to ensure consistent and replicable practices to enhance the study's reliability.

Part of achieving reliability is confirming the dependability of the results. Dependability refers to developing consistent, high-quality data collection strategies that other researchers can replicate (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I utilized several techniques, such as member checking, data interpretation, and the review of transcripts, to ensure the reliability and dependability of the study's findings. Member checking is a common technique researchers use to test findings and interpretations and enhance the trustworthiness of the data collected (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I performed member checking to verify the accuracy of the results. I transcribed participant answers and provided them with a copy for their review, allowing them an opportunity to clarify, revise, or modify their responses. I engaged the participants throughout the research study by asking them to review and provide feedback on the data analysis outcomes in Section 3. Once I completed Section 3, I provided the senior leaders of my client organization with a copy of the report to perform a final review and approve the results. Additionally, I used reflective journaling to document observations, thoughts, and conversations with participants and track data collected throughout the study. Reflective journaling helped increase self-awareness and mitigate potential biases, thus enhancing the reliability of the study’s findings.

Validity

To enhance the quality of the doctoral study, a researcher must identify and incorporate effective strategies to improve the validity and credibility of the study’s findings. Saunders et al. (2018) explained how credibility and accuracy enhance the validity of the research. Researchers conducting qualitative research must carefully assess and determine how they will achieve three forms of validity: construct, internal, and external (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). Therefore, a researcher who establishes construct, internal, and external validity confirms the credibility, confirmability, transferability, and saturation of their research findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I developed processes and strategies to improve the validity of my research study, such as member checking, allowing participants time to review the transcripts, and achieving triangulation. I also requested that the senior leaders of my client organization review and provide feedback on my analysis of data and information to improve accuracy and validity.

Data triangulation is a strategy researchers could use to enhance the credibility of their study. Denzin (2017) explained that triangulation using multiple data sources helps improve a study's validity because the researcher explores the business phenomenon through different perspectives. Patton (1999, 2015) explained that triangulation helps researchers mitigate the risk of bias and unintentional errors, thus contributing to the validity and quality of the study. Furthermore, Yin (2018) identified that triangulation helps researchers improve the validity of the research findings by confirming the accuracy of rich data by utilizing multiple sources of evidence. I used methodological triangulation to gain a holistic understanding of the business phenomenon and improve the study's credibility. Moreover, to enhance the credibility of the findings, I conducted member checking to verify the accuracy of the results. I also transcribed participant responses and shared a copy with them to review and modify, thus improving the credibility and accuracy of their responses.

Another way for researchers to enhance the validity of their study is to address the transferability of the study's findings to other groups and contributes to the research community. Saunders et al. (2018) explained that transferability explained the researcher's efforts to generalize the study's results and transfer them to other similar groups and contexts. Similarly, Maxwell (2021) identified that in qualitative research, generalization is essential for a researcher to transfer the study's original findings to alternate settings, groups, or populations. Rich details of the business phenomenon, research and data analysis techniques, and data interpretation strategies could help the researcher improve the transferability of their research findings. I detailed the processes and strategies used to select participants, collected, and analyzed data, and utilized methodological triangulation to achieve data saturation.

To improve the validity of their research, a researcher must also consider the confirmability of the findings. Yin (2018) discussed that researchers must address the confirmability criteria to improve the validity of their research findings. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) explained how confirmability refers to a researcher's ability to corroborate their findings through multiple sources of evidence. Triangulation and member checking are strategies researchers could use to validate and strengthen their research and mitigate research bias and errors (Denzin, 2017; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). I used methodological triangulation to improve the confirmability of my study's findings. I collected data using multiple sources of evidence, such as semistructured interviews, archival documents, public documents, performance metrics, and professional and academic literature.

A researcher must also consider how they will achieve data saturation to improve the validity of their research. Data saturation is critical in helping the researcher enhance the dependability and credibility of their research. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) explained that a researcher could achieve data saturation through triangulation. Stenfors et al. (2020) discussed that researchers contribute to the quality of their research by improving the validity through saturation. Stensfors et al. further explained how obtaining a rich body of evidence by collecting credible data from multiple sources helps promote critical thinking and mitigate the risk of bias, thus supporting quality research. Yin (2018) identified that researchers achieve saturation when additional data does not yield new topics, themes, or insight. I used methodological triangulation by using multiple sources of evidence. I continued to gather and analyze data until I could not uncover new themes, codes, or topics.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I provided a detailed account of how I explored successful strategies leaders of small businesses used to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The target population comprised three leaders of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States. I used purposive sampling and selected three senior leaders with power and influence while planning and implementing the organization's strategic initiatives to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. As the researcher for this qualitative single case study, I was the primary data collection instrument. To comply with IRB protocols requiring the researcher to host virtual meetings, I collected data from my participants by facilitating semistructured interviews via Zoom. I created an interview protocol and implemented strategies, such as member checking to mitigate the risk of bias and increase the validity and reliability of the findings. I applied the guidelines of the *Belmont Report* (Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1979) to ensure respect for the participant, justice, and beneficence. I respected the rights of the participants and obtained informed consent before proceeding with the interviews. Lastly, I consulted the IRB preapproved data source list and collected archival data, public data, and scholarly literature to achieve data saturation and improve the study's validity and reliability.

In Section 3, I use the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) as a guide to provide a detailed report based on the research requirements of the DBA consulting capstone. I followed the criteria established in the Baldrige Excellence Framework to create an organizational profile and complete a systematic and holistic understanding of my client organization (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). The key areas covered in Section 3 include the organizational profile and seven key sections for analysis, including (a) leadership; (b) strategy; (c) customers; (d) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; (e) workforce; (f) operations; and (g) results. I summarize the findings and contributions toward favorable business practices and positive social change. Lastly, I offer recommendations based on identified opportunities for improvement and suggestions for future research.

Section 3: Organizational Profile

Key Factors Worksheet

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. NK is the pseudonym I used to protect the identity of the client organization I worked with for this case study. I used the 2021–2022 Baldrige Performance Excellence Program as a strategic analytical tool to perform a systematic assessment and gain a holistic understanding of the operations at NK. Since its inception in the early 2000s, the leaders at NK have helped fill a gap by providing loc extension, treatment, repair, and coloring services in the Northeastern region of the United States. The key thematic findings of this qualitative single case study included (a) leadership focus, (b) communication, (c) strategic management, (d) voice-of-the-customer, (e) financial management, and (f) product research and development.

Organizational Description

NK is a small, independently owned for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States. Founded in 2002 as a limited liability corporation, the owner of NK focused on offering natural loc extension, loc repair, loc maintenance, and loc coloring services. Additionally, the leader took pride in formulating, producing, and using natural hair care products on their clients. In 2007, after numerous consumer requests, the leadership team expanded its product offering and started selling hair care products directly to clients. Twenty years into its business operations, the team at NK serves clients worldwide because of their exceptional services, products, and supportive community members.

The team at NK is passionate about offering high-quality natural products. The leadership team's deep knowledge of the benefits of using natural hair care products enabled them to develop products such as shampoo, conditioner, pomade, oils, and liquid hair vitamins to grow their sales in the hair care industry. After careful consideration, the leadership team recently decided to pivot and rebrand their operations; they anticipate discontinuing loc services by January 2024. The leadership team wants to align its efforts and concentrate on expanding and growing the natural care product lines. The owner of NK intends to manufacture and distribute high-quality products made of natural and nonharsh ingredients to consumers with naturally textured hair. Two other leaders hold a consultant role to help the owner of NK create a strategic plan to help the organization rebrand to gain a competitive advantage.

Organizational Environment

NK is a small, independently owned for-profit organization that offers high-quality loc services and natural hair products to clients globally. The organization environment assessment summarizes the main product offerings, mission, vision, values, workforce profile, assets, and regulatory requirements.

Product Offerings. The team at NK provides loc services and produces, packages, and sells natural hair care products and vitamins (see Table 2). Services for loc treatment are by appointment only. There are currently two locations where clients can book loc treatments services, both in the Northeastern region of the United States.

Additionally, the team at NK produces, packages, and sells their line of natural hair care products. Consumers can purchase natural hair care products and vitamins in person when receiving loc treatments or online through the company website. Customers can also purchase the product through an authorized wholesaler. Moreover, the owner of NK participates in trade shows to help promote the products.

Table 2

Product and Service Offerings of the Target Organization

Product or service	Type
Loc services	Extensions
	Repair
	Maintenance
	Coloring
Natural hair care products	Shampoo (brown line, charcoal detox, deep moisture, mint medley)
	Conditioner
	Pomade
	Charcoal exfoliates scrub
	Oil (brown sugar, green tea, apple, citrus, mint, lavender, vanilla, watermelon)
	Hair scalp oil
Vitamins	Liquid vitamins
	Hair, skin, and nails vitamins
Core competencies	Industry expert
	Creativity
	Social skills
	Quality improvement
	Information seeking

Mission, Vision, and Values. The mission at NK is to empower people to live healthier lives and embrace their natural beauty by treating their hair with the finest clean ingredients. Leaders at NK believe their clients deserve high-quality products from natural ingredients such as herbal extracts and natural oils that positively contribute to healthy hair. Manufacturing high-quality products with gentle and natural ingredients allows consumers to solve typical textured hair and scalp problems. The vision of the leaders of NK is to produce and sell high-quality natural hair care products that address textured hair and scalp problems. The leaders of NK are enthusiastic about developing and providing consumers with the best natural hair care products.

The leadership team is vested in providing consumers with high-quality natural products that make them feel good about themselves while protecting the environment. The leaders of NK are proud to offer authentic natural hair care products free of parabens and harsh chemicals. With a long-term vision of opening a manufacturing facility, the owner of NK is confident it will create jobs for individuals in the community and promote an excellent work environment. Table 3 highlights the mission, vision, and core values at NK.

Table 3

Mission, Vision, and Core Values of the Target Organization

Element	Statement or component
Mission	To empower people to live healthier lives and embrace their natural beauty by treating their hair with the finest clean ingredients.
Vision	To produce and sell high-quality natural hair care products that solve textured hair and scalp problems.
Values	Quality Natural ingredients Positive relationships Family Honesty Integrity

Workforce Profile. The workforce profile at NK consists of the owner and two advisors. The owner manages daily operations and currently offers all loc treatment services to clients. Employees must have a valid hairstyling license to perform loc services. The owner is also responsible for producing, packaging, and shipping all products sold through the online platform. Occasionally, the owner will request the assistance of family members to prepare the products for shipment. There are no formal educational or health and safety requirements the workforce must satisfy to participate in producing and selling natural hair care products.

Furthermore, there is no bargaining unit or union representation. The key drivers of engagement for the workforce include having the knowledge and resources to offer exceptional loc services and manufacture and producing high-quality natural products that align with the organization's mission and vision. Furthermore, with a clear vision of the organization's future, the workforce is motivated and engaged to work hard to help the organization achieve its strategic objectives. With the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, NK's workforce profile has changed. The company currently has one active employee and two business advisors who do not earn a salary from the business.

Assets. NK has two locations where it offers its loc treatment services. The leader rents the space where clients come to get their treatment services. The owner centralized the natural hair care line's formulation, packaging, and distribution out of a home office. Assets for the home office comprise furniture, a laptop, a printer, a telephone, product bottles, packaging, and ingredients.

Regulatory Requirements. NK is a for-profit limited liability corporation registered under the North American Industry Classification System code 812111 in the Northeastern region of the United States. The leader of NK adheres to state and federal employment guidelines, federal tax codes, regulations, and rules stated by the Internal Revenue Service and the state department of revenue. The leaders at NK are not subject to accreditation or certification requirements, health and safety regulations, environmental regulations, or industry standards. A third-party distributor manufactures and packages the vitamin line sold by the team at NK. The third-party distributor has liability insurance to cover any legal repercussions resulting from the sale and consumption of the vitamins; therefore, the leaders of NK do not have to purchase additional liability insurance.

Organizational Relationships

Organizational Structure. NK is a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region that does not have a board of directors. The organizational structure consists of the owner who manages and oversees daily operations. The two business advisors provide additional support to meet the organization's objectives and operational needs. The owner is responsible for all purchasing decisions. Although the business advisors can recommend purchase opportunities, the owner makes the final decision. The leadership team works closely together to oversee the organization's strategies. The absence of multiple levels of organizational hierarchy enables the leadership team to function as catalysts to drive expectations and results.

Customers and Stakeholders. The leaders at NK focus on two main consumer groups: (a) the retail consumer and (b) the wholesale customer. The two market segments for NK are (a) individuals with locs and (b) individuals with natural curls. The primary market segment targets local community members. The primary customers are the consumers who purchase the products for themselves, family, and their friends. There are also consumers in various geographic locations that buy natural hair care products through the company website. The team at NK also supplies products at a wholesale cost to other hair salons in the Northeastern region. Both retail and wholesale customers require and expect the company to use high-quality natural ingredients that are gentle on natural and loc treated hair. Other key stakeholders include the workforce, partners, and suppliers. The leaders of NK take pride in creating positive relationships with their stakeholders to satisfy the key expectations and requirements, which is a key contributor to the business's ongoing success (Table 4).

Table 4

Key Customers and Stakeholder Requirements

Requirement and expectation	Stakeholder				
	Retail consumer	Wholesale customer	Workforce	Partner	Supplier
Quality	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Natural product	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Value	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brand trust	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Positive relationship	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transparency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mission alignment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Strategic goals			✓	✓	✓
On-time payment			✓	✓	✓

Suppliers and Partners. The team at NK must collaborate with various suppliers, partners, and collaborators to satisfy the mission and vision of the organization and ensure ongoing success. The major suppliers provide raw materials such as bottles, packaging, essential oils, herbal extracts, and other hair product ingredients. Other suppliers include the postal outlet transporting the finished goods to the consumer. The leadership team is diligent in establishing a great relationship with their suppliers to continue purchasing ingredients in bulk at a discounted rate. The team at NK participates in trade show events to promote its services and hair care products. The booth's location influences the exposure level and is integral to gaining visibility. Satisfied customers function as collaborators by posting positive reviews of NK products on their social media platforms, thus contributing to the organization's success. Other partners include the property owners renting the space for loc services, financial institutions, and legal counsel. Understanding the role key suppliers, partners, and collaborators play in ensuring the ongoing success of NK (Table 5).

Table 5

Key Suppliers', Partners', and Collaborators' Roles at the Target Organization

Key stakeholder	Role
Supplier	Provide raw materials at discounted rates. Provide shipping rates at a discounted rate.
Trade show	Provide the opportunity to showcase products and services to large groups of people. Help promote brand awareness and increase visibility.
Financial institution	Provide banking services to support business operations. Provide financial assistance to support business operations.
Legal counsel	Provide legal advice that supports business operations.
Property owner	Provide a space to offer loc services to clients.
Collaborator	Actively promote the brand by posting reviews to their social media platforms.

Organizational Situation

The organization situation subsections provide an overview of the organization's competitive environment, strategic context, and performance improvement system.

Competitive Environment

Competitive Position. In 2021, the U.S. beauty salon industry was approximately $ 50 billion (Statista, 2022b). The hair care product industry generates approximately $15 billion in revenues in the United States and $90.2 billion globally (Statista, 2022a). The natural hair care industry has an anticipated growth of 6.5% annually because consumers perceive the importance of using safe and natural products in their hair (Statista, 2022c). NK competes locally in the Northeastern region with other businesses that offer loc services and natural hair care products.

Moreover, the team at NK created an online platform to sell natural hair care products globally. There are approximately 65 local competitors in the community where NK operates. Competitive factors include natural products, quality, and friendly service. The leaders of NK constantly listen to the consumers and improve their products and processes to satisfy their needs. The leadership team works hard to develop high-quality products using gentle products that set themselves apart from their competition.

Competitiveness Changes. The disruption from the pandemic created challenges for leaders of small businesses in the hair care industry and the organization's competitive position. The lack of resources and increased costs of raw materials and shipping created a challenge for small businesses to produce and sell their products. With the hair salons forced to close for extended periods, the leadership team at NK relied on their natural hair care products to sustain their operations. With the growing number of consumers wanting natural hair care products, there is a potential to seek new opportunities by selling products globally through the online platform.

The leadership team works closely together to assess the best path forward. After carefully analyzing its current operations and desired objectives, the leader of NK decided to pivot and is currently looking to rebrand the company. The team at NK is enthusiastic about maintaining relationships with its stakeholders and works diligently to promote its service. The leaders are looking at fostering new relationships with partners and suppliers to improve lead times and reduce costs.

Comparative Data. The leaders of NK do not have systematic processes to compare data related to its operations. There are limited sources of comparative data available because most businesses in this industry are not publicly traded and, therefore, do not publish their financial or employee results. Additionally, the lack of time and resources impede the leader's ability to locate and gather appropriate data for comparative and benchmarking purposes.

Strategic Context

Many factors impact NK leaders' ability to achieve their strategic objectives. NK's strategic goals are to find innovative ways to improve its product offerings and expand its market share. The leader of NK identified strategic challenges that could impede their ability to enhance performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Table 6 shows these challenges and the key strategic opportunities that organizational leaders can leverage to help overcome challenges.

Table 6

Organization Categories With Associated Strategic Challenges and Opportunities

Organization category	Strategic challenge	Strategic opportunity
Business structure	Small businesses with limited resources, people, and processes in place	Explore partnership opportunities.
Business operations and environment	Fierce competition due to globalization Limited space to manage daily operations Limited access to comparable data Social media presence to promote products Financial barriers that prevent the acquisition of assets, technology, space, and workforce COVID-19 pandemic shortages	Launch public awareness and brand recognition initiatives (such as trade shows). Develop a multilevel hierarchy to enable effective decision-making.
Supplier	Loss of suppliers The potential for a shortage of supplies and raw materials to cause production delays and result in loss of sales	Explore expanding the network of suppliers.
Customer	Loss of customers A growing number of consumers who are demanding all-natural gentle hair care products	Make products of entirely all-natural ingredients. Conduct research on ingredients before incorporating them into the final product. Achieve a high customer satisfaction rate.
Workforce	Limited staff to help with the production and sale of products	Motivated and engaged workforce. Recruit experts in the hair care and natural product industry.

Performance Improvement System

The leadership team at NK does not have a structured performance improvement system; however, they work diligently to measure the quality and performance of the products and the quality of the services based on customer feedback. The leader at NK informally employs a plan, do, check, act system to use customer feedback and improve products. The leadership team's mission, vision, and strategic goals influence the decision-making processes that guide performance improvement initiatives. Consumer feedback is invaluable to understanding their needs and preferences and improving strategies and products to increase consumer satisfaction. The team at NK actively listens to the customer's voice and prioritizes researching any ingredients that cause concerns. The leader investigates the problematic ingredient(s) to find practical solutions to improve the product. Furthermore, the leadership team at NK meets weekly to discuss opportunities to improve the system and grow its operations.

Leadership Triad: Leadership, Strategy, and Customers

The leadership triad emphasized three categories of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021): (a) leadership, (b) strategy, and (c) customers. The information provided in the leadership triad section will help leaders of small businesses understand the impact of leadership focus on strategy and customers. Argyris’s (1976) seminal work on single- and double-loop learning is appropriate for this analysis because learning is essential in identifying sustainable solutions to systematically improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The following section details how the leadership team at NK leads their organization, develops, and implements strategic initiatives to listen and engage with their customers.

Leadership

Senior Leadership

The leadership team at NK includes three senior leaders. One leader is responsible for daily operations management, production, and oversight. The other two leaders hold an advisory role and meet once a week to discuss strategies to help grow operations. There is no board of directors; therefore, the three senior leaders work collaboratively to establish the organization’s purpose and provide strategic guidance that aligns with the mission, vision, and values.

Establishing Vision and Values. Founded in 2002, the owner of NK established the vision, mission, and values based on the desire to provide customers with high-quality services that make them feel good about themselves. After the launch of the product line in 2007, the owner of NK envisioned a purpose to create and sell hair care products manufactured with natural ingredients. The leader deploys the vision as they plan their strategic initiatives to help improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The leadership team’s efforts and actions reflect the mission, vision, and values by manufacturing high-quality natural hair care products and acting with transparency, honesty, and integrity. No formal document details the organization’s mission, vision, values, and strategic direction; however, the leadership team’s actions demonstrate their commitment to supporting their mission, vision, and values. Table 7 illustrates how the senior leadership team’s personal actions show their commitment to supporting the organization’s core values.

Table 7

Senior Leaders' Personal Actions to Support the Organization’s Core Values

Stakeholder	Senior leaders' personal action
Workforce	Hold weekly Zoom meeting to strategize and find opportunities for improvement.
	Discuss how strategies align with mission, vision, and values.
Customer	Produce high-quality products made with natural ingredients.
	Offer quality loc services.
Key supplier	Develop and maintain positive relationships.
	Pay invoices on time.
	Conduct business with local suppliers when possible.
Other	Participate in tradeshows.
	Support the local economy.

Promoting Legal and Ethical Behaviors. The senior leadership team considers all legal and ethical considerations concerning the production and distribution of their hair care products and vitamin supplements. Moreover, by hosting weekly meetings, the senior leadership team assesses their situation and progress and requests input from all leaders to demonstrate their commitment to ethical and legal behaviors. A core value is acting with integrity; therefore, the leadership team will consult with their attorney and follow all regulatory requirements when offering their products. For specific legal questions, the owner of NK seeks the services of a local law firm. When completing the year-end financials and regulatory tax returns, the owner of NK prepares the documents and brings them to a local tax processing center for filing.

Stakeholder Communication. The senior leadership team at NK uses multiple formal and informal communication channels to communicate and engage their stakeholders. The senior leadership team participates in a weekly Zoom meeting to strategize to create a plan and implement strategic initiatives that will help improve performance, promote growth, and gain a competitive advantage. During these meetings, leaders also discuss challenges and capacity limitations that hinder performance and operational effectiveness.

When communicating with external stakeholders, leaders leverage social media and technology to communicate and engage their stakeholders. The leadership team at NK utilizes multiple social media platforms, including the corporate website, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, to promote their products and services. Communication via email or telephone with the customer occurs after they initiate the conversation with the leaders of NK. The customer may contact the organization for several reasons, including booking a time for a service, purchasing products, or filing a complaint. The owner of NK personally responds to email and telephone inquiries and complaints. Table 8 illustrates the communication plan used by the senior leadership team and its strategic purpose.

Table 8

Senior Leaders' Communication Plan

Internal or external	Stakeholder	Communication technique	Frequency	Strategic purpose
Internal	Senior leaders	Zoom meeting Telephone call Text message	Weekly	Identify customer needs. Exchange knowledge and information.
External	Customers	Email Telephone Social media platform Website	As needed	Engage customers. Book services and sell products. Provide an update on the order status. Resolve customer inquiries and complaints.
	Other stakeholders (partners, suppliers, collaborators)	Email Telephone Social media platform Website	As needed	Engage other stakeholders. Provide updates on new product launches. Evaluate strategic partnership opportunities.

Creating an Environment for Success. The senior leadership team at NK monitors their operational environment. During the weekly meetings, the leadership team discusses goals and objectives to help improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The owner of NK is directly involved in the daily operation, engaging customers, and acquiring the resources required to produce and sell products. There is no systematic process to cultivate agility, resilience, accountability, organizational and individual learning, and intelligent risk-taking. The owner of NK would like their children to eventually take over the family business; however, no systematic process focuses on succession planning and the development of future leaders.

Creating a Focus for Action. The senior leadership team hosts weekly Zoom meetings to create a focus on actionable measures that could help improve the organization's performance. Each week, the leadership team identifies the actions taken, progress accomplished, and additional actions required to help improve processes and performance. The owner takes notes during each meeting to create a list of tasks and procedures required for the upcoming week. To set expectations that balance value for customers and all stakeholders, the leadership team at NK promotes a culture that values manufacturing products made of quality natural ingredients.

Governance and Societal Contribution

Effective governance and stewardship are integral in guiding the leadership team's efforts and contributing towards the organization's lasting success. The governance and societal responsibilities systems help leaders create an environment conducive to transparency, accountability, and fair treatment of all stakeholders (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). Therefore, it would be advantageous for the leaders to develop, implement, and monitor an adequate governance system that complies with legal and regulatory implications to reinforce transparency, accountability, and fair treatment for all stakeholders.

Governance System. No formal governance system is in place to detail how the organization ensures responsible governance. The leadership team at NK includes the owner and two advisors who meet weekly to strategize and determine goals and objectives. There are no systematic processes in place to hold senior leaders accountable for their actions or the implementation of the organization's strategy. There is no board of directors to oversee strategic planning, and there are no internal or external audits to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of operations. Moreover, no systematic processes guide the development of a succession plan for the senior leadership team.

Performance Evaluation. No systematic processes are in place to evaluate the performance of the organization's senior leaders. The organization's senior leaders are not earning a salary through the business; therefore, they did not develop and implement performance evaluation metrics. Furthermore, there are no metrics to promote accountability, professional development, and the improvement of leadership effectiveness to help improve performance.

Legal and Regulatory Compliance. The leadership team adheres to local legal, regulatory, and community concerns relative to the production and distribution of their natural hair care products. The hair vitamins produced by a third-party manufacturer also satisfy all legal and regulatory requirements. Additionally, the owner of NK adheres to legal and regulatory compliance relative to the loc services offered at two locations in the Northeastern region of the United States.

Ethical Behavior. During weekly communications, the leadership team promotes ethical behavior through transparency, honesty, and integrity. Furthermore, the senior leaders question each other's strategies, actions, and motives to promote accountability and ethical behaviors.

Societal Well-Being. The leadership team at NK contributes to the societal well-being of their stakeholders and the environment by incorporating natural non-harsh ingredients in their products. The leader at NK uses recycled packaging to box and ship the products to customers, thus reducing waste and positively impacting the environment. Additionally, the owner uses technology to communicate and transmit payments to stakeholders, thus reducing their carbon footprint.

Community Support. The leadership team acts as role models for the minority population and girls in the Northeastern region of the United States. Moreover, the leaders at NK support their local economies by supporting local businesses to procure some of the ingredients and materials required for production.

Strategy

Developing and implementing strategic objectives is critical for leaders to align their efforts with the organization's mission, vision, and values, improve performance and gain a sustainable competitive advantage. Developing strategic objectives helps leaders plan and identify the resources required to promote excellence and exploit market opportunities. During the strategic planning and implementation, leaders must identify the short- and long-term objectives that will guide their strategic efforts.

Strategy Development

Strategic Planning Process. The senior leadership team at NK holds weekly meetings to develop the organization’s strategies. The leaders participate in the strategic planning process informally and continuously. Of the three, two senior leaders suggest strategic initiatives in the planning phase; however, the final decision is the owner's responsibility. The leaders work collaboratively to assess their strategic position and identify the organization's future direction. On the short-term planning horizon, the leadership team wants to develop social media content like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to engage customers and influence their purchasing behaviors.

Additionally, part of the short-term planning strategies involves working on the corporate website and developing a wholesaler platform to facilitate the online purchase of products. The leaders at NK also plan and identify which trade shows they will attend;

therefore, adequate planning helps to ensure that the benefits of attending each trade show outweigh the costs.

Innovation. The leaders at NK identify and analyze industry trends to promote creativity and innovation. The leaders leverage technology and social media platforms to understand the environment and consumer demands, opportunities, and threats. As indicated in Table 6, many strategic opportunities could help the leaders of NK promote innovative practices, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage. For instance, the leadership team could explore strategic partnership opportunities to access the resources to improve operational efficiencies. Moreover, the leaders could evaluate public awareness and brand recognition initiatives, such as trade shows to access customers and potential customers, thus improving sales and profitability. When determining which strategic opportunities are intelligent risks to pursue, the leadership team conducts a cost-benefit analysis and exploits the opportunities they have the capacity to pursue.

Strategy Considerations. The leaders of NK collect data formally and informally. The leaders of NK collect data by participating in tradeshows, obtaining feedback from customers and other stakeholders, online research, and market trends. The owner informally gathers data from conversations with stakeholders, industry experts, regulatory bodies, and online sources. The leaders hold weekly meetings to analyze data to understand the needs and demands of the industry. Based on the feedback, the leadership team conducts a SWOT analysis to understand the factors that impact performance. The leaders must consider the strategic challenges, changes, and disruptions that could affect their operations (see Figure 2). The limited resources, people, and processes could create gaps in the planning process and hinder the leadership team's ability to execute its strategic plan efficiently. Additionally, globalization and the increase in online shopping require the leadership team to consider leveraging technology to increase brand awareness, engage customers, listen to the stakeholders' voices, and improve performance.

Figure 2

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

Work Systems and Core Competencies. Staying true to their core values of producing and selling high-quality products and services, the leaders evaluate each process of their operations. The organization's capacity is limited because only one active employee manages daily operations. Therefore, the leadership team must assess the processes completed internally and those outsourced to strategic partners, including suppliers and collaborators. The owner of NK takes pride in finding the best natural ingredients to incorporate into their products. Furthermore, the owner wants to keep the production in-house to ensure the consistent quality of the hair care products. The leader outsources certain processes to third-party providers, such as product labels and multi-vitamins.

Key Strategic Objectives. The key strategic objectives for NK align with its mission, vision, and core values. Table 9 provides an overview of the three main strategic objectives: quality, visibility, and accessibility. Each strategy considers how the leadership team will create value for its stakeholders. Over the next twelve months, the leaders of NK will continue to research the best natural ingredients to incorporate into their products, evaluate strategic partnership opportunities, and engage and involve family members in the business to develop a positive work culture. Moreover, the leaders are working to create and share social media content that will engage their key stakeholders. The leadership team will also improve the corporate website to facilitate the shopping process and improve customer experience.

When evaluating long-term objectives (2-5 years), the leaders of NK want to gain an understanding of the industry and cultural trends to expand their networks and engage target markets at the international level. The leaders will continuously seek customer feedback and listen to the consumer's voice to adapt and improve their products and processes, thus, offering consistent, high-quality products and services to all customers. Furthermore, the leadership team will participate in trade shows nationwide to increase brand awareness and access new customers and strategic partners.

Table 9

Strategic Objectives, Focus, and Priorities

	1 Quality	2 Visibility	3 Accessibility
Strategic focus	High-quality products, services, and work environment.	Recognized and reputable brand in communities and households globally.	Products and services adapted to satisfy the needs of stakeholders.
Strategic priorities	1. Customers receive standardized high-quality services and products. 2. Strategic partnerships with suppliers, collaborators and other stakeholders. 3. Develop and maintain a positive and productive work culture.	1. Products and services are well known in all communities served. 2. Understand and develop strategies to gain access to international markets. 3. Sale strategies are adapted to gain access to different target markets.	1. Products and services satisfy the needs of the customers. 2. Diversify sales model to sell products in person and online. 3. Encourage mobility by participating in tradeshows across the nation.
Action plan	1. Research the best ingredients to incorporate into products, 2. Seek strategic partnerships with local stakeholders. 3. Engage family in business and promote honesty, integrity, and transparency.	1. Leverage social media to engage customers and promote products and services. 2. Research industry and culture trends. 3. Seek and engage new target markets at the international level.	1. Listen to the voice-of-the-customer to improve products and services. 2. Improve corporate website and leverage social media to improve online sales. 3. Participate in trade shows.

Strategic Objective Considerations. The strategic planning process is necessary for leaders to identify key strategic objectives and assess how to achieve sufficient balance among the organization’s needs. The strategic goals established by the leaders of NK help overcome some of the strategic challenges and take advantage of strategic opportunities to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. By exploring strategic partnership opportunities, the leaders can access complementary resources to help improve operational efficiencies. Moreover, with a knowledgeable and competent workforce, the leaders create a strategy to produce high-quality products that differentiate them from their industry competitors. Ultimately, the leaders stay true to their mission and core values to develop strategic initiatives that satisfy the needs of their stakeholders. To balance the short- and long-term planning horizons, leaders must solicit stakeholder feedback and continuously monitor, manage, and adapt their strategies accordingly.

Strategy Implementation

Action Plan. As described in Table 9, the leadership team at NK aligned their action plan with their three main strategic objectives. The action plan includes strategic processes that will guide the leaders of NK in achieving their strategic goals. The senior leadership team at NK works collaboratively to determine the best path forward that aligns their efforts with the organization’s mission, vision, and core values.

Action Plan Implementation. During the implementation phase, the leaders evaluate their internal capabilities. The leaders will complete processes and actions in which they have the knowledge, skills, and competencies. When leaders identify skills, competency, and knowledge gaps, they outsource or seek external partners' complimentary resources.

Resource Allocation. As mentioned in the strategic challenges (see Table 6) and SWOT analysis (see Figure 2), the leaders of NK have limited resources and funding to support their operations. The owner of NK funneled some of the revenue from the services business and secured a revolving line of credit to help finance the purchase of ingredients and materials to produce products. Additionally, to minimize costs, the owner set up a home office to manufacture products and manage daily operations. The owner earns a salary from the service division of the business; however, none of the senior leaders earn a wage from the product division. The leadership team evaluates the resource and capacity requirements for each trade show to determine whether the benefits of attending outweigh the costs.

Workforce Plans. No formal process in place details how the workforce plans will help the leadership team achieve their short- and long-term strategic objectives. The owner engages their family members, collaborators, suppliers, and other stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of the strategic plan. There is no plan to address any changes in capability and capacity needed to ensure continuous progress in achieving strategic goals. Because the owner is the only active employee in the organization, their absence could hinder the production of products and progress towards strategic goals.

Performance Measures. The leadership team does not have any formal performance metrics to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of their action plans. There is no clear separation between the revenues earned from the in-person service and product division of the business; therefore, it is difficult for the owner to make financial data-driven decisions. The owner tracks the number of orders from online sales ad hoc. Furthermore, customer feedback is essential to identify the need to improve products or processes, such as customer service. The owner of NK also analyzes competitor products and price points against their own to evaluate the quality and value of products. During trade shows, the leaders of NK assess performance based on the number of products sold.

Performance Projections. The leaders of NK identified several changes in consumer buying behavior trends they must consider for their performance projections. As a result of the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, the leaders identified a significant increase in customer buying patterns. Moreover, with e-commerce giants such as Amazon, the leaders noticed that customers expect fast product delivery times. The leaders anticipate the online global market will continue to grow; therefore, they must consider how to develop and maintain a strong online presence. There will also be more focus on leveraging social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook to increase brand awareness and engage their target audience. Moreover, based on the leaders' observations, there is a decline in attendance at trade shows. Although the leaders anticipate attendance to improve somewhat, they do not expect the same volume as before the pandemic. Therefore, the leaders must research each trade show and strategically select the ones that will give their target audience access to their products.

Action Plan Modifications. During the weekly meetings, the leadership team identifies events and circumstances that could hinder their progress toward achieving strategic objectives. The leadership team discusses changes to the action plan and identifies internal and external factors that could impact their strategic efforts and progress. Because of the limited resources and capacity, there is a gap in the rapid response time to execute new action plans.

Customers

Customer engagement, management, and retention strategies are critical for leaders to influence purchasing behaviors. Effective customer management strategies can improve the customer experience, thus improving satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, by creating strategies focused on the customer, leaders could increase the likelihood of repeat customers and attract new customers, thus enhancing growth and competitiveness.

Customer Expectations

Customer Listening–Current Customers. The leaders of NK value customer feedback regarding their experience with products and services. Some customers provide feedback in person during a loc service or treatment. Other customers provide feedback by calling a toll-free number, using the direct message feature on social media platforms, or by email. The owner also collects customer feedback by analyzing and responding to comments on customer review websites, such as Yelp and Trustpilot. Customer feedback and complaints create opportunities for the leadership team to reflect on their processes and improve and strengthen their operations to maintain customer confidence and loyalty.

Customer Listening–Potential Customers. The leaders of NK always welcome feedback from past and potential customers. The leaders develop and upload social media content to engage and gain feedback from potential customers. Additionally, by participating in trade shows, the owner of NK can interact with past, current, and potential customers and listen to their hair concerns, needs, and demands. By soliciting information through various communication channels and listening to the customer's voice, the leaders can uncover valuable information and exploit opportunities to improve operational efficiencies and grow.

Customer Segmentation. The leaders of NK must identify and understand their customer groups and market segments to develop a strategy that will drive growth and competitiveness. Table 3 outlines two main consumer groups: (a) retail consumers and (b) wholesale customers. The are two market segments: (a) individuals with locs and (b) individuals with natural curls. Identifying markets allows the leaders of NK to gather additional information on the needs and demands of their customer groups. For example, the texture of the hair and maintenance requirements are different for individuals with locs compared to those with natural curls. Furthermore, locs tend to get dry; therefore, the ingredients in the loc products will differ from those with natural curls. Based on their expertise of being a loctician for more than 20 years, the owner of NK is knowledgeable of the different needs of the two market segments. To help grow the business, the owner of NK wants to focus on improving sales in the direct consumer and wholesale customer groups by developing and enhancing the loc and natural hair care products.

Product Offerings. The leaders of NK are considerate of the evolving industry trends, product innovation, and customers' needs and demands. As depicted in Table 2, the leadership team has various product and service offerings, such as loc treatments, shampoos, conditioners, hair oils, and vitamins. The leaders identified a growing population of more health-conscious consumers who want to use products with natural ingredients. The leaders are aware that customers are looking for products that do not dry out the hair, have great hold, and smell good. By participating in trade shows, analyzing competitor and industry trends, and listening to the voice-of-the-customers, the leaders of NK will improve current products and develop new products that will help drive sales, grow their operations, and gain a competitive advantage.

Customer Engagement

Relationship Management. The leaders of NK use a blend of in-person and technological tools to interact with current and potential customers. The owner of NK directly interacts with customers during service appointments. Trade shows allow leaders to interact with past, current, and potential clients, allowing them to exchange information and see and smell the products offered. The leaders also leverage social media platforms to promote their brand and products to a large audience.

Customer Access and Support. Direct consumers access the organization's service and support in person or through the company website. Customers can contact the owner using the toll-free number on the website, email, or direct messaging feature on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. Businesses wishing to place wholesale orders contact the owner by telephone or email.

Complaint Management. There are no formal processes in place to address customer complaints. The owner of NK manages and responds to all customer complaints. Because of the limited resources and workforce, it could take time to resolve a customer complaint. Customers usually voice their concerns by contacting the owner by email or telephone. The leader takes all complaints regarding product ingredients seriously and will research alternate ingredients that will maintain the quality of the product and help recover customer confidence. Sometimes, because of the limited staff, customer complaints related to order and delivery status take time to resolve. If a parcel is lost in transit, customers must go through the courier insurance to obtain a refund which is a lengthy process.

Fair Treatment. The leadership at NK works diligently to ensure the equitable and fair treatment of their customer groups and market segments. The owner stays true to the company's mission to empower people to live healthier lives and embrace their natural beauty by treating their hair with the finest clean ingredients. All customers, whether direct consumers, wholesalers, individuals with locs, and natural curls, receive the same customer experience.

Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Engagement. There are no formal and consistent processes to capture customer satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and engagement. Satisfied customers will express their satisfaction during their loc services or by commenting on a post on a business's social media platform. Dissatisfied customers will voice their opinions on a post on a business's social media platform, customer review websites, or by email.

Satisfaction Relative to Other Organizations. The leader of NK will obtain customer satisfaction feedback ad hoc. Customers provide feedback to the owner informally during loc treatment services on different factors such as consistency, smell, ingredients, and results. Listening to the customers is integral for the leaders of NK to understand how their products and services compare to its competitors and opportunities to improve performance and gain a competitive advantage.

Use of the Voice-of-the-Customer and Market Data. The leaders use voice-of-the-customer to identify opportunities to improve their products. The voice-of-the-customer helps inspire innovative thinking to develop new products to solve common textured hair problems and facilitate strategic, intelligent risk-taking. Customer feedback is integral for senior leaders to modify and adapt their processes and strategies and improve future products and services.

Results Triad: Workforce, Operations, and Results

The results triad emphasized three categories of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021): (a) workforce, (b) operations, and (c) results. The information provided in the results triad section will help leaders of small businesses design strategies that improve key operational processes considering their stakeholders' needs and demands. Moreover, identifying results allows small business leaders to understand improvement opportunities and integrate strategies that add value to all stakeholder groups. Argyris's (1976) seminal work on single- and double-loop learning is appropriate for this analysis because using learning and knowledge to challenge current processes and systematically redesign the systems and strategies is critical to improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Workforce

The workforce is a key driving force in helping leaders achieve their strategic objectives. According to the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), the workforce includes all individuals who are actively supervised and contribute to achieving the organization's strategic goals. Leaders must assess their capacity and capability to understand their strengths and limitations and identify strategies to access the knowledge, resources, skills, and competencies to optimize performance, growth, and competitiveness.

Workforce Environment

Capability and Capacity Needs. The leadership at NK assesses their capacity and capability needs by determining the senior leadership team's knowledge, skills, and competencies. The owner and two senior leaders value their family roots and promote professional development. The senior leaders identify and leverage their strengths to help the organization progress in achieving its strategic goals. The owner of NK is responsible for the daily management of product and service operations. Individuals must be licensed and registered with the state to perform loctician services. To formulate products, individuals must understand how to incorporate natural ingredients to achieve high-quality results. The leaders understand their short-term capacity and capability needs; however, there are no systematic processes to understand and plan long-term.

New Workforce Members. There are no systematic processes to recruit, onboard, and hire new workforce members. To improve performance and increase revenues, the leaders could consider developing a performance management plan that includes processes to attract, recruit, select, and onboard new hires.

Workforce Change. There are no systematic processes to prepare for the organization's changing capability and capacity needs. With the leader’s anticipation of increasing production and expanding their product lines, they could plan for the workforce required to help them progress towards achieving strategic objectives.

Workforce Accomplishments. The owner of NK is the only active employee in the organization and works diligently to research the best ingredients to produce high-quality products. Additionally, with their extensive expertise in loc treatments and services, the owner uses those skills to provide high-quality services to their clients. The two other senior leaders use their knowledge, skills, and competencies to help in the strategic planning and guide the owner to make decisions that will help improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Workforce Environments. The owner of NK manufactures and packages all products in their home. All products are manufactured in the owner's kitchen and stored at home. The owner reviews and abides by all state and federal regulatory requirements relative to health and safety for in-home businesses. To perform loc treatment and maintenance services, the owner of NK rents space in two locations in the Northeastern region of the United States. The property owners of the premise ensure the respect of state and federal health, safety, and accessibility guidelines.

Workforce Benefits and Policies. There are no systematic processes to support the workforce via services, benefits, and policies. Future employees could benefit from learning from an industry expert and gain the knowledge to combine the right blend of natural ingredients to produce high-quality products.

Workforce Engagement

Drivers of Engagement. The senior leadership team is passionate about developing products made of natural products that solve textured hair and scalp issues. The owner of NK is equally passionate about offering loc services to clients that help them feel good about themselves. The passion, commitment, and love to help their stakeholders embrace their natural beauty is an integral part of what drives their motivation and engagement to help the organization achieve its strategic goals. Through continuous research, the leadership team strives to identify the best natural ingredients to produce the best results. One of the senior leaders is committed to helping the organization by using his financial knowledge to help analyze and control costs to help maximize profits. The other senior leader uses his knowledge of technology to help produce and manage social media content that will help engage customers and improve sales.

Assessments of Engagement. The senior leaders gather feedback from one another during their weekly meetings to help them assess their engagement and motivation in maintaining their roles and contributing to the organization's success. The senior leaders maintain open and honest communication and discuss the strengths and challenges in growing their business operations and the requirements to sustain engagement and promote progress.

Organizational Culture. The senior leaders of NK foster an organizational culture that values quality, natural ingredients, positive relationships, family, transparency, and honesty. The leaders welcome feedback to identify opportunities for improvement and find sustainable solutions to problems. Additionally, the leadership team develops its strategic initiatives based on the organization's mission, vision, and core values.

Performance Management. There are no systematic processes to support the workforce via services, benefits, and policies. The leadership team could strategize to develop and implement a total rewards structure that will help attract and retain talented employees. The leaders could also consider starting to pay themselves for their contributions to the company.

Performance Development. There are no formal development processes in place. The owner is the only active employee capable of offering loc services and formulating the natural products sold to consumers. After obtaining customer feedback, the owner will conduct research to improve their products. When identifying new and innovative products launched by competitors, the owner might identify an opportunity for professional development and learn how to formulate a new product to launch to consumers.

Learning and Development Effectiveness. No systematic processes measure the effectiveness of workforce members' learning and development systems. Although the leadership team informally employs a plan, do, check, act system, no actionable strategies are in place to measure, monitor, and manage the efficiency and effectiveness of their efforts. The leaders could consider identifying processes and performance result metrics to track the effectiveness of the learning and development of the workforce. The leaders could acquire the knowledge and capabilities to improve operational efficiencies through learning and professional development.

Career Development. No systematic processes help support and manage the career development of the workforce. The leader of NK learns through research to learn how to modify and adapt products based on consumer demand; however, there is no learning and growth to help improve operational efficiencies and performance.

Equity and Inclusion. No systematic processes ensure that performance management and development and career development processes support equity and inclusion for a diverse workforce. With growth plans, the leaders could start planning how to promote workplace equity and diversity. Equity and inclusion play an essential role in recruiting and selecting future employees because the leaders want to ensure they select individuals who are the best fit for the organization.

Operations

Leaders of small businesses must adequately plan, implement, and manage processes to optimize capacity and capabilities, operational efficiencies, costs, performance, and competitiveness. The senior leaders of NK, particularly the owner, are responsible for developing, implementing, monitoring, and managing operational strategies and processes to support the organization’s mission and vision and achieve strategic objectives. Argyris’s (1976) seminal work on single- and double-loop learning is appropriate for this analysis because learning is essential for leaders to acquire the knowledge and skills to systematically improve operational efficiencies, thus gaining a competitive advantage. The following section details the work processes and operations of NK.

Work Processes

Determination of Product and Process Requirements. The senior leadership team at NK relies on the voice-of-the-customer and key stakeholders when determining the key products, services, and work process requirements. The leaders collect data mostly from informal conversations and customer and key stakeholders' feedback. The owner of NK also conducts research by looking at competitor products and identifying new innovative products they should consider adding to the production line. Additionally, the leaders will determine what work processes to complete in-house and to outsource to a strategic partner. For example, to maintain high-quality standards, the leader of NK requires that the formulation and production of hair care products processes occur in-house. On the other hand, the leadership team is comfortable outsourcing certain processes, such as producing and printing product labels, to third-party suppliers.

Key Work Processes. No formal and structured processes detail the organization's key work processes. The leadership team informally performs different work processes to progress toward achieving their strategic goals. Table 10 outlines the organization's key work processes and the role and responsibilities of each senior leader.

Table 10

Key Work Processes

Key work process	Senior leader responsible	
	Owner	Advisors
Loc services	✓	
Manufacturing products	✓	
Marketing management	✓	
Website and inventory management	✓	
Customer relationship management	✓	
Financial management	✓	
Supplier relationship management	✓	
Strategic partnership management	✓	
Trade show planning and management	✓	
Strategic planning	✓	✓

Design Concepts. There are several strategies the leader of NK employs to design their products and services to satisfy stakeholder requirements. Testing products on clients receiving loc service treatments is an effective method for the leader to see their products' effectiveness firsthand. The leader also relies on customer feedback to find product improvement opportunities. Additionally, through web-based research and visiting local hair product retailers, the leader can analyze industry trends, identify new innovative competitor products, and assess customers' changing needs.

Process Implementation. No systematic processes help senior leaders measure and control work processes of day-to-day operations to ensure they meet the requirement of key work processes. The leaders could consider implementing a tracking system to monitor the progress of tasks, production, and strategic priorities. Additionally, implementing work processes could encourage the leaders to share, transfer, and diffuse the knowledge to help the workforce develop their capabilities, thus ensuring business continuity.

Support Processes. There are no support processes that ensure the senior leadership team meets key business requirements.

Product and Process Improvement. No systematic processes exist to guide the senior leadership team to improve product and process performance, enhance core competencies, and reduce variability.

Supply Network Management. There are no formal processes that help the leadership team select qualified suppliers to satisfy their operational needs and enhance performance and customer satisfaction. The leader of NK performs internet searches when seeking new suppliers. The leaders enjoy dealing with local suppliers; however, because of the increasing cost of ingredients and products, there is an increase in purchases from suppliers overseas, particularly in China. There are no processes that monitor and manage supply networks and relationships with suppliers and support agility in responding to changes in customer and market needs.

Management of Opportunities and Innovation. No systematic processes guide the leadership team in pursuing strategic opportunities.

Operational Effectiveness

Process Efficiency and Effectiveness. There are no systematic processes for leadership to effectively manage costs and ensure operational efficiencies. The leaders could consider implementing procedures to improve productivity and promptly fulfill customer orders. Furthermore, adequate processes could assist during production to ensure consistent, high-quality results.

Security and Cybersecurity. The leaders of NK rely on the security and privacy controls embedded in their software. For example, Shopify integrates security features in its web-platform software to help protect the rights and confidentiality of businesses and customers. The team at Square, a point-of-sale software entity, engineered security into all their hardware and software to ensure all payments are encrypted and protect users' confidential information.

Safety. The leader of NK rents two spaces to perform loc treatment services. The property owner of the premise ensures they follow all health and safety protocols required by the state. The leader maintains a safe environment by keeping their work area clean and adhering to health and safety regulations. The owner of NK produces all-natural hair care products at their residence. The leader ensures they work in a clean environment and have storage space to organize the products.

Business Continuity and Resilience. There are no systematic processes to ensure the leadership team can anticipate, prepare, and recover from disasters, emergencies, and disruptions.

Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management

Measurement, analysis, and knowledge management strategies provide insight into how leaders use knowledge and learning to optimize performance and competitiveness (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). The single- and double-loop learning theory is a pillar to understanding the leaders' process to identify, manage, and modify their systems to improve their system design and ensure sustainability. The following section details how the leaders of NK select, gather, analyze, and manage data and knowledge to enhance their core systems and processes, thus improving performance.

Measurement, Analysis, and Improvement of Organizational Performance

Performance Measures. The owner of NK employs the reports from Square, their point-of-sale software, to track some of the loc service sales. The owner relies on Shopify reports to track and analyze online sales. When attending trade shows, the leader creates a spreadsheet with the inventory on hand. After the show, the owner reconciles sales receipts with the data on the spreadsheet.

Comparative Data. No formal processes detail how the leaders select comparative data and information to support fact-based decision-making. The leader of NK conducts periodic web-based searches to identify their competitors' products, services, and price points. Particularly, the leader analyzes the ingredients and formulation of competitor products.

Measurement Agility. No systematic processes exist to help the leadership team ensure that the performance measurement systems can respond to rapid or unexpected internal or external changes and provide timely data.

Performance Analysis and Review. There are no organizational performance metrics that to assess the organization's capabilities and competitive performance.

Future Performance. The leadership team does not employ a systematic process to project the organization's future performance.

Continuous Improvement and Innovation. There are no formal processes that guide leaders in using the findings from performance reviews to develop and prioritize an ongoing improvement plan. The leadership team informally employs a plan, do, check, act system; however, do not have any systematic actionable strategies to evaluate performance and develop and monitor improvement initiatives.

Information and Knowledge Management

Quality. The senior leaders of NK work collaboratively to identify the costs associated with product production. The leadership traced the costs of each ingredient to a purchase invoice to calculate the total cost of one unit of product. The markup for each product to determine the selling price is 100% for retail customers and 50% for wholesale consumers.

Availability. The leaders share and review any organizational data during their weekly meetings. The leaders track cost data using a spreadsheet and discuss their findings during the weekly meetings. The leaders do not share documents with external users other than for tax purposes at year-end.

Knowledge Management. The owner of NK has over 20 years of experience in the loc maintenance industry. By working on clients and touching hair, the owner gains knowledge and insight into developing products to help solve textured hair issues. The two advisors have financial and manufacturing knowledge useful in strategic planning processes. Additionally, through conversations with stakeholders and customer feedback, the owner researches ways to improve products.

Best Practices. There are no systematic processes where the leadership team shares best practices to implement organizational improvement strategies.

Organizational Learning. The leadership team has no systematic processes to use their knowledge and resources to embed learning in the organization's operations.

Collection, Analysis, and Preparation of Results

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The overarching research question for this case study was: What strategies do leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage? I collected data using multiple sources of evidence, such as semistructured interviews, archival documents, and public data. A thematic analysis of the data revealed the following themes: (a) leadership focus, (b) communication, (c) strategic management, (d) voice-of-the-customer, (e) financial management, and (f) product research and development. The conceptual framework focusing on Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop learning reinforces the key themes identified because learning is integral to improving performance.

The collection, analysis, and preparation of the results section required performing a holistic assessment of the performance at NK while maintaining alignment with the purpose statement and research question. After completing a robust assessment of the key stakeholder systems of NK using the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), I identified some strengths and opportunities for improvements in the following categories: (a) products and processes, (b) customer, (c) workforce, (d) leadership and governance, and (e) financial and market.

Thematic Findings

I collected data using multiple sources of evidence, such as semistructured interviews, archival documents, and public data. I used Yin's (2018) five-step thematic approach to collect data: (a) compile the data, (b) disassemble the data, (c) reassemble the data, (d) interpret the data, and (e) draw conclusions about the data. The following key themes emerged as a result of the thematic analysis: (a) leadership focus, (b) communication, (c) strategic management, (d) voice-of-the-customer, (e) financial management, and (f) product research and development. Table 11 summarizes the frequency with which participants mentioned each theme during the semistructured interviews. The conceptual framework focusing on Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop learning reinforces the six key themes identified because learning is integral to accessing, absorbing, and diffusing the knowledge to implement systematic modifications to the organization's design to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Table 11

Frequency of Six Key Themes During Semistructured Interviews

	Key theme	Participant P1	P2	P3	Total
1.	Leadership focus	2	15	21	38
2.	Communication	7	10	12	29
3.	Strategic management	12	23	28	63
4.	Voice-of-the-customer	18	15	24	57
5.	Financial management	8	27	11	46
6.	Product research and development	25	5	13	43

Thematic Finding 1: Leadership Focus

The first theme I identified was leadership focus. The effectiveness of the leadership team impacts the organization's ability to develop and execute successful strategies that support success and sustainability. Leadership focus is integral to developing, prioritizing, implementing, and managing a plan that helps the organization achieve its strategic objectives. According to the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), focus is multidimensional and considers how the organization will develop its leaders, workforce, and suppliers to create value for all stakeholders. The goal is to develop a focus on action by setting expectations and taking intelligent risks to systematically improve processes and achieve greater dimensions of organizational success. Focus requires individuals to use adaptive leadership techniques to mobilize their stakeholders and prioritize strategic initiatives to overcome challenges and thrive in a constantly changing business environment (Heifetz et al., 2009). The participants mentioned that leadership focus is vital to developing, implementing, and executing a plan to help the organization improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Single- and double-loop learning supports leadership focus because leaders must integrate learning to prioritize initiatives and allocate resources to achieve strategic objectives proactively. Through learning and knowledge acquisition, leaders develop organizational memory, thus understanding how to focus on core processes required to improve performance (Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020). The participants identified opportunities to improve leadership focus. P1 indicated that learning and finding strategies to improve time management skills and focus on following through with strategic priorities would be advantageous. P2 commented that the leader's difficulty in prioritizing tasks creates challenges in managing the time and resources required to help the organization progress toward achieving strategic objectives. P3 identified that shifting the leaders' focus and establishing clear priorities and expectations could help improve operational efficiency and effectiveness. The lack of follow-through and documentation is indicative that the leaders understand that they must embrace learning to develop their abilities to focus and accelerate progress.

Additionally, the participants commented that weekly leadership meetings are advantageous for reviewing and identifying priorities and areas of focus for the coming weeks. Through double-loop learning, the leadership could embrace a systems-thinking approach and integrate a responsive learning system to assess and challenge processes and determine how to shift the focus to overcome challenges and thrive (Jaaron et al., 2021). P2 and P3 stated they understand that they must find strategies and learn how to improve leadership focus to properly manage operations and overcome the challenges owners of small businesses face in a competitive global environment. P3 commented that improved leadership focus could help the team provide a clearer direction and balance the needs of stakeholders while optimizing performance. Heightening leadership focus helps leaders prioritize the processes and activities that add value to stakeholders (Peters, 2011; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Double-loop learning highlights the importance of leaders embracing a learning culture within the organization and understanding how and when to focus their energy, efforts, and resources to systematically improve processes (Argote et al., 2020). Embracing learning is conducive to gaining access to the knowledge and resources required to systematically improve processes. Leaders could gain insight into the internal and external factors that impact performance and identify strategies that promote a sustainable future.

Thematic Finding 2: Communication

The second theme I identified was communication. Effective communication strategies with all stakeholders are vital to understanding their needs and demands. Senior leaders must identify and implement effective communication techniques with internal and external stakeholders that satisfy a strategic purpose. Frequent, appropriate communication helps leaders mitigate risks by relaying meaningful information to key stakeholders (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). The participants discussed how the weekly leadership meetings are advantageous to keep leaders informed, obtain feedback, and identify the required changes to promote success. P1 identified that weekly meetings effectively promote organization and accountability, discuss stakeholder needs, and collaborate to solve business problems. P3 stated that communication is integral to verbalizing thoughts and identifying how to transform them into actionable strategies. Transparent and honest communication helps leaders build rapport and trust with their team, thus positively influencing motivation and performance (Ewing et al., 2019). Moreover, effective communication strategies help mitigate ambiguity and uncertainty that could hinder motivation, engagement, productivity, and performance (Sahar & Siddiqui, 2019). The participants acknowledge that communication is integral to setting clear expectations and developing a plan to improve operational efficiencies, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Communication is a pillar of double-loop learning because learning results from acquiring, sharing, and diffusing knowledge that shifts the learner's perception (Argyris, 2002). As leaders shift towards a double-loop learning mindset, they must participate in discussions and interact with other learners to acquire the information to develop and improve their capabilities and discard organizational defensive routines (Argyris, 1990). Regular communication between leaders and stakeholders promotes meaningful dialogue that strengthens relationships (Shaik & Makhecha, 2019). P2 discussed how, by encouraging open communication; individuals can participate in meaningful interactions that clarify expectations, learn new knowledge, and gain insight into improving performance. P3 stated that regular communication through weekly meetings allows one to recognize good behaviors and progress, thus boosting motivation and performance.

Leaders could also use technology and social media platforms to encourage stakeholder communication and discussion. Technological evolutions allowed leaders to leverage their social media platforms to access and facilitate discussions with a global audience (Drummond et al., 2020). P1 mentioned how social media grants them access to a vast network of users that extends beyond their local reach. The participants noted that social media platforms are a convenient strategic tool to communicate with customers and potential customers about their products, services, upcoming promotions, and events. I reviewed NK's Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube social media pages. I identified that the leadership team used those social media platforms to communicate (a) short videos showing the final product of loc treatment services, (b) upcoming promotions, (c) tutorials to encourage discussion and excitement, (d) new product launches, and (e) upcoming trade shows. Keeping stakeholders informed and encouraging meaningful discussions provides opportunities to listen to the voice-of-the-customer and obtain valuable feedback to improve products and services.

Thematic Finding 3: Strategic Management

The third theme I identified as strategic management. Strategic management is vital for leaders of small businesses to develop, execute, manage, and modify a plan that aligns with their mission, vision, and values and contributes towards achieving a strategic objective. In competitive global markets, leaders must consider integrating sustainability into their strategic efforts to create value, improve performance, and ensure business continuity and longevity (Dhanda & Shrotryia, 2021). Effective strategic management allows leaders to develop actionable steps that align with the organization's mission, vision, and values and optimize capabilities and performance. The participants discussed how the planning and execution of strategic initiatives are equally essential to help the leadership team improve performance and achieve their goals. P2 and P3 highlighted the importance of monitoring the progress during the strategic implementation phase to assess the progress toward achieving strategic objectives. P3 stated that leaders must create a foundation that acts as a blueprint to guide strategic initiatives. The participants agreed that focusing on developing and executing a strategic plan is integral to the organization's survival.

P3 indicated that developing a comprehensive business plan outlines how the leadership plans to acquire and allocate the resources required to achieve their goals. I reviewed the business plan of NK, which included key information such as (a) the mission, vision, and values; (b) leader roles and responsibilities; (c) growth projections for the next 5 years; (d) primary products and services; and (e) target markets. Creating a business plan and developing effective processes to execute and monitor strategies could help leaders identify innovative opportunities that create value and are key drivers to gaining a sustainable competitive advantage (Bocken & Geradts, 2020). Leaders of small businesses who effectively formulate and implement strategic initiatives can proactively allocate resources and influence processes that align with the organization's mission, vision, and value (Quansah & Hartz, 2021). The participants agreed that the strategic management process allows them to evaluate and understand their surroundings and define the direction to help them achieve their objectives.

Double-loop learning supports strategic management by allowing leaders to evolve in their decision-making processes to find sustainable solutions and achieve strategic goals. Leaders who shift their mindset and embrace double-loop learning acquire the knowledge and capabilities to modify their organization's design and systematically correct errors that hinder performance and productivity (Chi et al., 2022). Clauss et al. (2021) identified that a critical factor to organizational agility, resilience, and lasting success is the leader's ability to acquire the knowledge to develop and execute a plan, develop their leadership skills, and learn how to adequately allocate resources to optimize performance. Furthermore, embracing a double-loop learning mindset allows leaders to assess, modify, and reengineer their strategic processes to positively transform their business environment and promote a sustainable future (Kolawole et al., 2021). Leaders could evaluate the internal and external factors impacting performance, learn how to leverage their strengths, and find opportunities to overcome challenges (Ratten, 2020). P3 stated that leaders could identify and eliminate business vulnerabilities that impact performance, growth, and competitiveness by evaluating the systems, processes, and external environments that impact their business.

Similarly, P2 commented that the strategic plan that serves as the foundation of the leadership team's efforts is not helpful or efficient if the leadership team cannot identify and manage actionable strategies. P2 further discussed that strategic management allows leaders to develop, implement, and organize a system that identifies and eliminates processes that do not add value for the stakeholders. Leaders can uncover effective strategies to improve agility and resilience with adequate communication, commitment, accountability, and integrating learning into their culture. Therefore, strategic management is an essential ongoing process leaders must develop, implement, and manage to adapt to changes in business environments and optimize performance.

Thematic Finding 4: Voice-of-the-customer

The fourth theme I identified was voice-of-the-customer. According to the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), leaders use voice-of-the-customer to capture customer data by finding innovative opportunities to engage customers and understand their needs, demands, and desires. The leadership team at NK relies on the voice-of-the customer to understand their strengths and identify opportunities to improve the quality of products and services. All participants agreed that listening to the voice-of-the-customer and finding actionable solutions based on valued feedback is vital to improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The participants stated they use different techniques to capture the voice-of-the-customer, such as gathering in-person feedback during service appointments and trade shows. The use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, facilitates engagement, interactions, and communication with customers and potential customers and gathers valuable feedback that influences the modification and improvement of product and service offerings.

The voice-of-the-customer supports double-loop learning by providing leaders with valuable customer feedback, causing them to reevaluate their processes and modify their systems designs to improve performance. Gathering data through voice-of-the-customer and paying particular attention to customer complaints and concerns is an efficient strategy that encourages learning to improve processes, thus improving customer satisfaction (Kim & Lim, 2021). Moreover, leaders who embrace double-loop learning could use the voice-of-the-customer to acquire, share, and diffuse the knowledge required to adapt to change and mitigate disruptions that could hinder performance (Frankowska et al., 2022). Double-loop learning encourages leaders to embrace a mindset that challenges the entire system's design and core values to find systematic solutions that solve the root cause of the business problem. P1 mentioned they always welcome customer feedback because their feedback is the driving force between product improvement and development. P2 indicated that customer complaints provide a learning opportunity for the leadership team to review their processes and find sustainable solutions to improve operations and product and service quality. P3 discussed that leaders must take customer concerns seriously and learn to adapt their strategies to satisfy the needs of their stakeholders. Although the leadership team does not collect and document formal voice-of-the-customer feedback, they review comments received in-person, by telephone, email, and social media platforms.

Capturing the voice of the voice-of-the-customer is integral for leaders to embrace a customer-focused approach to delivering quality products and services and achieving organizational excellence (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). Through learning, leaders could develop and monitor information management systems and contribute to acquiring the knowledge required to improve resilience and agility (Huang et al., 2021). Managing and monitoring feedback based on the voice-of-the-customer enables leaders to gain insight and knowledge to proactively address complaints and concerns and respond to innovative opportunities to improve performance and gain a competitive advantage. The participants agreed that customer satisfaction is a priority, and they should promptly handle all customer complaints and concerns. Additionally, the participants noted that listening to the voice-of-the customer and using a customer-focused approach to delivering products and services helps maintain customer confidence and a positive brand image.

Thematic Finding 5: Financial Management

The fifth theme I identified during the thematic coding process was financial management. Effective financial performance is essential in improving an organization's resilience and agility in a globally competitive market (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). Financial management is vital for leaders to plan, allocate, and manage resources to ensure adequate cash flow to sustain their operations. Many leaders of small organizations find themselves in vulnerable financial positions because of rising costs and a lack of resources (Thorgren & Williams, 2020). Leaders are responsible for managing their finances through adequate planning, organizing, monitoring, and control to promote stability and ensure lasting success (Krüger & Meyer, 2021; Nwanchukwu & Vu, 2020). All participants agreed that financial management is vital to ensure they have enough money to purchase ingredients to manufacture their products. P1 stated that as an owner of a small organization, their limited resources prevent them from taking advantage of cost-saving opportunities in some instances. P2 and P3 commented that financial management is integral to understanding how to define the cost per unit of a product to determine an appropriate sale price that will help improve profits. P2 stated the importance of tracking and evaluating all costs and revenues and attempts to eliminate expenses that do not add value to the organization. By adopting sound financial management practices, leaders could plan ahead and identify how to obtain sufficient cash flow to cover operating expenses.

Double-loop learning supports financial management practices because leaders must acquire adequate knowledge to make informed decisions and develop realistic financial forecasts to achieve their strategic objectives. Through research, leaders of small organizations can acquire evidence through professional literature and expert advice to learn, share, transfer, and diffuse the financial knowledge required to develop strategies that improve performance and competitiveness (Krüger & Meyer, 2021). Giannetti et al. (2021) identified that leaders could embrace double-loop experiential learning to gradually modify their accounting routines and system design by refining their costing, identifying, and eliminating errors, and accumulating knowledge to find innovative solutions to improve performance. P2 stated that to control costs, the leadership must learn how to identify and control their costs and adjust their sale price accordingly to improve profitability. P3 commented that leaders should learn from their past financial mistakes to avoid carrying them forward into future decisions. P2 and P3 indicated that financial management is a continuous learning opportunity to work on planning, managing, monitoring, and controlling their accounting processes to ensure the company's lasting success.

Thematic Finding 6: Research and Development

Research and development (R&D) are integral to all manufacturing companies to find innovative ways to develop and improve products and processes, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Embedding organizational learning into R&D practices allows leaders to enhance customer value, identify and exploit opportunities, improve processes, reduce waste, increase productivity, and enhance performance (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2021). Additionally, R&D encourages leaders to build and share knowledge and find systematic opportunities for meaningful change. All participants discussed how R&D is essential to identifying innovative opportunities to develop new products and improve current formulas. P1 discussed how R&D is a critical part of their role. Through R&D, they can identify the best ingredients to incorporate when formulating complex formulas and create high-quality products that solve textured hair issues. P1 identified that product development requires finding test subjects to monitor results. Based on progress, P1 stated they conducted additional research to determine how to modify the formula to improve the final results. P3 discussed how R&D ensures consistent, high-quality natural hair care products. Therefore, R&D is a continuous learning process conducive to improving performance.

Double-loop learning could help reframe R&D by assisting leaders in shifting their mindset and using a design thinking approach to promote innovation (Robbins & Sandberg, 2023). Leaders who choose a systems-thinking approach to facilitate double-loop learning conduct their R&D by challenging their processes, questioning assumptions, and exploring effective learning strategies to thrive in unstable business environments (Jaaron et al., 2021). P2 discussed how during the R&D phase, the leader must consider all the processes required to formulate a product, such as ingredients, suppliers, and customers. P2 identified that one process could impact another; therefore, leaders must look at the entire production process to improve operational efficiencies. P3 discussed how R&D is critical to understanding how to maintain and improve the quality of the products. P1 stated that R&D provides an opportunity to identify problems, find solutions, and rectify errors to develop and sell innovative products that satisfy stakeholder needs, thus enhancing competitive advantage. All participants agreed that conducting their research provides an opportunity to learn and gain hands-on experience to improve products and innovate. Therefore, R&D is an integral part of organizational learning. Through R&D and education, leaders can acquire knowledge to enhance their capacity and capabilities and identify innovative ways to create and improve their products and satisfy stakeholder needs.

Product and Process Results

Customer-Focused Product and Service Results

The leadership team at NK is in the early deployment stage, transitioning from reacting to problems to proactively finding improvement opportunities. The leadership team gathers performance results informally and does not track comparative information to monitor the effectiveness of performance improvement strategies. However, the leadership team understands the importance of in-person and online presence to reach a wider audience and attract new customers. Additionally, as an owner of a small business, the leader identified cost-effective ways to promote the products and services and monitor stakeholder engagement and interactions, such as Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube. The owner of NK relies on the voice-of-customer to understand their needs and demands. By offering loc treatment services, the owner identified a learning opportunity by gaining hands-on experience and assessing product results on customers. Participating in trade shows is another strategy the owner of NK used to promote customer-focused products. When attending trade shows, the owner interacts with customers and potential customers to understand what they want in a product.

Process Effectiveness and Efficiency

There is a lack of organizational performance results measuring work process effectiveness and efficiency. There is no comparative data or evidence of deploying any systematic approach that aligns with the organization's strategic objectives. As outlined in Table 9, the owner of NK is primarily responsible for managing and ensuring the effectiveness of all key work processes. The two other senior leaders who hold advisory roles are responsible for assisting with developing and overseeing strategic planning initiatives. The single- and double-loop learning theory could be advantageous to the senior leadership team by helping them transition from defensive learning routines and providing an opportunity to improve operational efficiencies through learning and the acquisition of knowledge. Moreover, by embracing double-loop learning, the leaders of NK could gain insight into effective strategies to enhance their capabilities and agility and adapt their processes to changing business environments.

Safety and Emergency Preparedness

The leaders of NK work diligently to adhere to health and safety standards. For the rental space where they offer loc treatment services, the owner of NK follows the health and safety guideline requirements of local, state, and federal mandates and the property owner. When manufacturing and storing products in-house, the owner of NK adheres to the local, state, and federal safety requirements. Although the leaders of NK adhere to health and safety regulations, there are no performance results to evaluate, monitor, and manage processes to help prepare and recover from disruptions. The leader does not deploy a systematic approach to ensure business continuity and resilience. By embracing organizational learning, the leaders of NK could evaluate their environments and gain insight into factors that could cause disruptions and hinder performance and productivity. Through learning and acquiring knowledge, the leadership team could develop a disaster recovery plan with strategies to help overcome disruptive challenges.

Supply-Network Management Results

There are no performance results or comparative data to assess the effectiveness of NK's supply-network management. Although the leaders want to support local vendors, they find themselves purchasing from online overseas vendors who sell raw materials at a fraction of the cost. The leaders are loyal to certain suppliers; however, in some instances, the shortage of materials from certain vendors causes production delays. There is an opportunity for the leaders to embrace learning and research comparative and industry performance results to identify how to improve their supply networks, reduce costs, and improve overall performance.

Customer Results

Customer Satisfaction

The leaders of NK informally track the performance results associated with customer satisfaction. Although the leaders do not have formal systematic performance metrics or processes to document, organize, and analyze results, they listen to the voice-of-the-customers to understand the strengths of their product and service offerings and identify opportunities for improvement. When offering in-person services, the leader receives upfront feedback from customers and potential customers. Additionally, the owner interacts with customers, potential customers, and other stakeholders during tradeshows to engage customers and assess their level of satisfaction. The leadership team monitors online review ratings to gauge customer satisfaction. Table 12 depicts average customer satisfaction based on Yelp, Google, and Facebook reviews. Figure 3 highlights customer satisfaction ratings. Analyzing customer satisfaction ratings and feedback provides leaders with a learning opportunity to improve products and services, thus enhancing customer satisfaction.

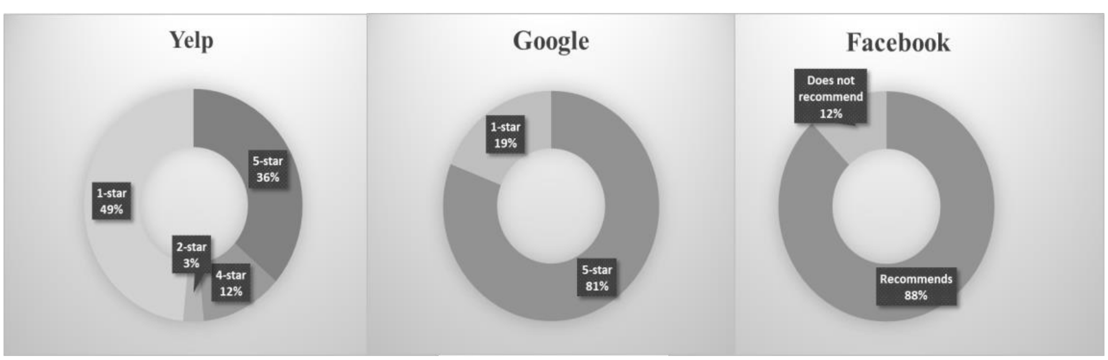
Table 12

Customer Satisfaction Based on Website Reviews

Name of website	Number of reviews	Average rating
Yelp	33	3.0
Google	22	4.4
Facebook	63	4.4

Figure 3

A Visual Comparison of Customer Satisfaction Ratings on Yelp, Google, and Facebook



Customer Engagement

The leadership team engages customers both in person and online. The leaders communicate with customers via email concerning their recent orders and shipments. Additionally, the leaders leverage social media platforms to post content that engages current and potential customers. Table 13 depicts the number of followers, total posts, views, likes, and comments for Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. Figure 4 shows customer engagement comparative data for 2021–2023 for Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Although YouTube gathered nearly two million views, all customer engagement activity occurred between 2008 and 2014. The number of views highlights customer engagement potential, and by embracing organizational learning, the leaders of NK could identify how to leverage their social media pages to encourage customer engagement and enhance performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

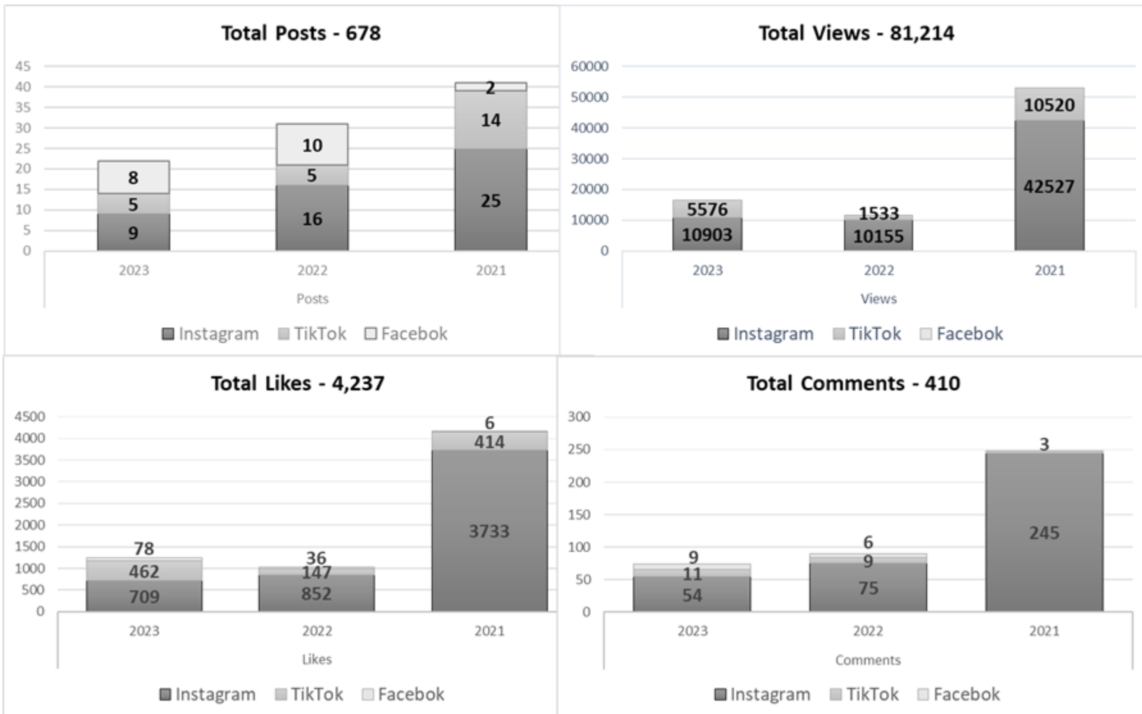
Table 13

Total Followers, Posts, and Likes by Social Media Platform

Social media platform	Followers	Posts	Views	Likes	Comments
Instagram	4,577	633	63,585	NA	374
TikTok	221	45	17,629	1,637	23
Facebook	2,600	NA	NA	2,600	13
YouTube	12,300	14	1,685,092	9,711	367

Figure 4

2021–2023 Customer Engagement Statistics for Instagram, TikTok, Facebook



Workforce Results

Workforce Capabilities and Capacity

The performance results for workforce capabilities and capacity are limited. The owner does not track data trends or comparative information to identify strategies to improve workforce capabilities that align with the organization's mission, vision, and values. The owner of NK is the only active employee in the organization. The other two senior leaders hold an advisory role by participating in weekly meetings to discuss strategies. The senior leadership understands their capabilities and limitations; however, no strategic initiatives are in place to enhance their capabilities and capacity. When the owner does not have the expertise or capability to execute a business process, they will solicit informal advice and feedback from family members, business professionals, and industry experts. Additionally, when appropriate, the owner outsources certain processes to third-party service providers, such as labels.

Workplace Climate

The workplace climate results align with the overall organization's needs. The leaders of NK ensure that the workplace climate abides by state regulatory health and safety guidelines. The owner of NK exhibits signs of single- and double-loop learning through education and acquiring knowledge relative to industry safety protocols. The production of natural hair products completed at home respects safety protocols. For loc service treatments, the owner is a registered loctician in good standing and respects health and safety protocols.

Workforce Engagement

The workforce of NK is limited, and the owner is the only active employee in the organization. There are no performance results or comparative data to measure workforce engagement. The three senior leaders maintain engagement due to their strong family ties and candid, open discussions. The leaders do not receive compensation for their efforts and contributions. During the weekly meetings, the owner and two advisors assess their commitment to collaboratively finding sustainable solutions to help improve operations, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The decision to participate in trade shows and increase advertising, promotion, and production results from research and feedback to identify what adds the most value and satisfies stakeholder needs and requirements.

Workforce Development

There are no performance results or comparative data to track workforce development. The voice-of-the-customer motivates the owner to develop and improve products and services continuously. The advisors provide guidance based on their experience and expertise. The desire to satisfy the needs and demands of the stakeholders drives the owner to conduct research, learn, and develop their skills. The leadership team did not create or integrate any mandatory training programs; however, each is tasked with understanding when learning is necessary to improve products and processes to optimize performance.

Leadership and Governance Results

Leadership

There are no formal organizational performance results or comparative data to assess the effectiveness of the senior leadership team. Informal results indicate that senior leadership must develop, implement, monitor, and manage strategies that hold the leadership team accountable and contribute towards improving performance. However, as depicted in Table 7, some of the leadership team's actions support the organization's core values. For example, engaging in weekly meetings helps the senior leadership team discuss challenges and upcoming events to identify opportunities for improvement. Additionally, the leaders are adamant about using high-quality natural ingredients that offer customers consistent results. Table 14 highlights senior leaders' actions aligning their efforts with the organization's mission and vision.

Table 14

Senior Leader Actions that Align with Organizational Mission, Vision, and Values

	Senior leaders' actions
Mission	
To empower people to live healthier lives and embrace their natural beauty by treating their hair with the finest clean ingredients.	Select natural, non-harsh ingredients to formulate products. Select ingredients that help solve common textured hair problems to improve customer confidence. Offer loc treatment services that help customers feel good about their natural hair.
Vision	
To produce and sell high-quality natural hair care products that solve textured hair and scalp problems.	Conduct research to understand how to use ingredients to develop high-quality products that produce results. Working directly with clients during loc service treatments to assess the effectiveness of products and learn and adapt formulas based on observed results. Participate in weekly Zoom meetings to plan and find opportunities for improvement.
Values	
Quality Natural ingredients Positive Relationships Family Honesty Integrity	Research ingredients before integrating them into the production of hair care products. Positive and open communication with senior leaders. Include a list of ingredients on each product bottle. Acknowledge operational deficiencies and welcome opportunities for improvement.

Governance

No formal governance or board of directors ensures oversight and accountability of NK's operations and progress toward strategic objectives. There are no performance results or comparative information to promote the accountability and progress of senior leaders. The leaders acknowledge many opportunities for improvement and that accountability is integral in improving operational efficiencies and performance. The owner prepares all year-end documents and takes them to a local tax preparation firm for processing. Additionally, when required, the owner will seek the advice of legal counsel.

Law and Regulations

The leadership at NK adheres to all local, state, and federal rules and regulations. The owner is a licensed loctician in good standing and monitors changes in guidelines and regulations when offering loc treatment services. The leader also monitors local, state, and federal rules and regulations to ensure compliance relative to the production and work completed in their home business. Additionally, for processes outsourced to external strategic partners, such as hair care vitamins, the leader ensures the supplier is in good standing and has no regulatory violations or concerns.

Ethics

No performance results or comparative data evaluate how the senior leadership teams promote ethical behaviors and actions. The senior leaders lack communication strategies that promote good ethics. Although there are no formal processes, the senior leaders have strong family values that reinforce the importance of honesty, integrity, and transparency. The senior leaders openly discuss any concerns during their weekly meetings and discuss how they can overcome challenges and customer concerns. The weekly meetings could create an opportunity for senior leaders to integrate double-loop learning to challenge their culture, values, and strategies and identify systematic processes to help enhance ethical behavior.

Society

There are no performance results for this result element of leadership and governance. As the owner of a small business, the leader understands the importance of supporting local stakeholders, when possible, which include restaurants, banks, tax filing businesses, legal firms, and shipping couriers. As a female minority business owner, the leader of NK could be a role model and inspire women, girls, and people of minority to pursue their dreams and goals. Additionally, the leaders of NK focus on using non-harsh natural ingredients to help preserve the environment. The leaders of NK recycle when possible, such as using packaging materials when shipping client orders, which helps reduce waste. Furthermore, using technology helps reduce the amount of paper and ink consumed, thus reducing their carbon footprint.

Financial and Market Results

Financial Performance

There are few performance results reported and no comparative information to track growth and competitive advantage. The owner does not have an integrated system that tracks all product and service sales. The leader accounts for in-person sales manually and does not track or separate the service revenues from the product sale revenues. Reports are available through the website provider and point-of-sale software to track online product revenues, including daily sales and the percentage of new versus repeat customers. The leader totals manual and online receipts once a year when preparing their annual tax return. There is no inventory management system or tracking of the cost of goods sold. The leader of NK has a revolving loan administered by Square. For each sale, a percentage is withheld at the time of sale to reimburse a portion of the loan.

Market Performance

The leaders of NK have no organizational performance results or data trends to report. The leadership at NK does not hold a mentionable share (0.0003%) of the $15 billion natural hair care market in the United States (Statista, 2022b)**.** Moreover, considering the owner is the owner's active employee who separates their time between offering services and manufacturing and selling products, there has been no progress in the last year to improve their market position and increase their market share. The leaders of NK serviced their regular clientele; however, there were few new customers and no penetration into new markets. As indicated in Table 13 and Figure 4, the leaders have posted content that captures the viewers' attention; however, the activity did not boost revenues or market share. Double-loop learning could help the leaders learn why most social media stakeholder interactions did not result in a sale and identify systematic solutions to modify the organization's design, thus improving performance.

Strategy Implementation Results

The leadership team did not report any performance results, data, trends, or comparative data to evaluate the effectiveness of strategy implementation efforts. As indicated in Table 8, the leaders had three main strategic focal points for the year: (a) offering high-quality products, services, and work environment; (b) creating a recognized and reputable brand in communities and households globally; and (c) adapt products and services to satisfy stakeholder needs. Table 15 highlights the leadership team's progress in using their action plan to achieve their strategic priorities. Because of the limited resources and organizational capabilities, many actionable processes are not started or are in progress.

Table 15

Target Organization Leadership Progress Towards Achieving Strategic Goals

	Not started	In-progress	Achieved
Strategic focus 1: Quality High-quality products, services, and work environment.			
Actionable processes:			
Research the best ingredients to incorporate into products		✓	
Seek strategic partnerships with local stakeholders		✓	
Engage family in business and promote honesty, integrity, and transparency.			✓
Strategic focus 2: Visibility Recognized and reputable brand in communities and households globally.			
Actionable processes:			
Leverage social media to engage customers and promote products and services.		✓	
Research industry and culture trends.		✓	
Seek and engage new target markets at the international level.	✓		
Strategic focus 3: Accessibility Products and services adapted to satisfy the needs of stakeholders.			
Actionable processes:			
Listen to voice-of-the-customer to improve products and services.		✓	
Improve corporate website and leverage social media to improve online sales.	✓		
Participate in trade shows.	✓		

Key Themes: Processes

Processes comprise a sequence of interrelated activities to produce the products or services that satisfy customer demands. Using the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), leaders refer to four factors: (a) approach, (b) deployment, (c) learning, and (d) integration to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of their processes. The following section highlights the process strengths and opportunities for improvement based on a systematic assessment of the stakeholder systems of NK.

Process Strengths

Process Strength 1. The leaders of NK collaborate during their weekly meetings to identify strategies to help improve performance, such as product and service development and improvement. Through weekly interactions and active discussions, the leaders share knowledge and information to determine how to identify innovative processes to satisfy stakeholder needs. Additionally, through the strategic planning process, the leaders prioritize initiatives and deliverables for the upcoming year that supports achieving their strategic objectives.

Process Opportunities

Process Opportunity 1. The leaders of NK created strategic planning processes; however, they lack a structured and systematic approach to creating actionable processes and executing their strategic priorities. The leadership team completes processes based on their capabilities and funding and, in some instances, lacks leadership focus and accountability; thus, hindering their ability to achieve their strategic goals. Moreover, the lack of specificity to execute the steps required in the process, thus limiting opportunities to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The leaders at NK could research past Malcolm Baldrige recipients to learn and understand successful strategies in executing their strategic plan. Using a double-loop learning approach, the leaders could acquire knowledge and reshape their processes to proactively respond to changing business environments, implement actionable strategies that align with their mission, vision, and values, and improve product and service quality.

Process Opportunity 2. The leaders of NK could benefit from developing their leadership skills and implementing appropriate processes to ensure business continuity. The owner is the only active employee responsible for R&D, formulating, producing, and selling the products. The owner is also the only one offering the loc treatment services. Productivity during the week depends on the owner's availability; therefore, their unavailability hinders performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Additionally, P1 identified they would like to keep the business in the family and eventually have their children take over the company. The leaders could consider participating in leadership training to develop their leadership competencies and improve their strategic focus, ability to set strategic priorities, and proactively respond to stakeholder demands. Moreover, through learning, the leaders could gain insight into developing a succession plan, allowing them to maintain product quality standards and support business continuity.

Process Opportunity 3. The leaders of NK understand the importance of gathering customer feedback to improve quality and provide customers with a positive experience; however, the leaders do not have an integrated system to capture, organize, and analyze customer data to take intelligent risks. The leaders of NK could develop and manage a system that collects, analyze, responds to, and follows up on customer feedback to help improve their overall satisfaction and attract and retain them. For example, the leaders could create an email for the sole purpose of receiving and responding to customer complaints and concerns. The leaders could then organize complaints in a centralized database to track trends, solutions, and customer resolution strategies. By obtaining customer feedback, the leaders could embrace double-loop learning to systematically identify opportunities to improve the organization's design, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Key Themes: Results

Results refer to the outputs and outcomes based on the client organization's performance. Processes comprise a sequence of interrelated activities to produce the products or services that satisfy customer demands. Using the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), leaders refer to four factors: (a) levels, (b) trends, (c) comparisons, and (d) integrations to conduct a holistic assessment of the organization's performance. The following section highlights the results, strengths, and opportunities for improvement based on a systematic assessment of the performance results of NK.

Results Strengths

Results Strength 1. The leader of NK uses knowledge, expertise, and R&D to formulate and consistently sell high-quality products and services. The senior leader aligns their efforts with the mission, vision, and values to research and incorporate quality natural ingredients to formulate products that solve common textured hair issues. By working directly with clients, the leader can diagnose hair problems, develop a system of products, and monitor the results to evaluate their effectiveness. The leader can monitor and adjust products to optimize results and customer satisfaction by taking pictures before, during, and after the treatment.

Results Opportunities

Results Opportunity 1. The leadership does not have a centralized accounting system to track revenues, costs, inventory, and financial projections, identify trends, and compare performance outcomes. The leadership team tracks in-person sales manually through Square and online sales through Shopify. The leadership team could research different business software solutions, such as accounting software which seamlessly integrates with Shopify and Square to track revenues and expenses and generate reports to measure performance. The leaders could also use accounting software to prepare budgets to help with sales forecasts, production planning, and projected cash outlays required to sustain operations. One of the organization's leaders is knowledgeable about finance and budgeting and could share his knowledge with other leaders, enabling them to learn and develop their financial literacy capabilities. Furthermore, by comparing their budget figures to actual performance, the leaders can evaluate their performance and identify gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Results Opportunity 2. The leaders of NK collect feedback from customers ad hoc but do not have repeatable processes to measure their performance across all customer segments. The leader could benefit from collecting customer data by encouraging them to complete a post-service survey. The leader could also enable a feature on their online store and encourage clients to rate their purchase and post a review. Encouraging feedback is a customer engagement strategy that helps leaders evaluate performance and customer satisfaction. The increase in positive reviews could help attract new clients, thus improving profitability.

Furthermore, as indicated in Table 13 and Figure 4, the content posted on social media captures the customers' attention. However, sales are stagnant despite the high number of content views. The leaders could leverage their social media platforms to track customer engagement rates and find opportunities to convert viewers into customers. The leaders could collect client interaction data and measure, analyze, monitor, manage, and modify online content to engage customers and influence their purchasing behaviors.

Results Opportunity 3. There is no system to evaluate and measure the performance results of strategic priorities. The lack of alignment and established follow-up mechanisms prevent the leadership team from gathering and analyzing performance results to optimize operational efficiencies. The leadership team could develop a tracking system, such as a live dashboard, which identifies deliverables and their status, whether not started, in progress, or complete. A live tracking system could create visibility on the status of tasks and promote leader accountability. This system could also measure the performance of the leadership team. The tracking system could also track the progress of production and order processing to motivate the team to perform and improve efficiencies. Moreover, the leaders could gather data to evaluate their performance, identify future trends, and compare their results to industry standards.

Project Summary

In completing this qualitative single case study for the DBA consulting capstone, I used the 2021-2022 Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) as a strategic tool to gain a holistic understanding of the system design of a small for-profit organization in the Northeastern region of the United States. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. As an independent scholar in the DBA consulting capstone, I was the researcher and scholar-consultant to the leadership team of a small for-profit FOB. The Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) served as a guide that allowed me to assess and analyze seven key areas: (a) leadership; (b) strategy; (c) customers; (d) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; (e) workforce; (f) operations; and (g) results. Based on the assessment, I collaborated with my client organization to identify their strengths and uncover opportunities for improvement to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The specific business problem addressed in this case study is that some leaders of small businesses lack strategies to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Organizational learning is fundamental for leaders to acquire, share, and diffuse the knowledge required to develop creative strategies that help improve performance. To solve complex business problems and gain a sustainable competitive advantage, leaders must integrate learning into their culture and use it as a pillar to develop, manage, and transfer knowledge (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek et al., 2019). According to the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), learning is a core characteristic of high-performing organizations. Moreover, learning is integral to helping leaders improve their performance and evolve from reacting to problems to improvement, refinement, and innovation. For this reason, Argyris's (1976) single- and double-loop learning theory is appropriate given the context of this case study. The organization's leaders could embed learning into their core values to acquire knowledge and improve their capacity and capabilities. I gained rich insight into how the leaders of my client organization used learning to gain the knowledge to improve their decision-making processes and enhance operational efficiencies.

Using a purposive sampling technique, I selected three leaders of a small for-profit business in the Northeastern region of the United States that had the power to influence the organization's strategic direction. I collected data using multiple sources of evidence, such as semistructured interviews, archival data, public data, and academic literature, to achieve methodological triangulation and data saturation. I used a thematic approach to code the data and identify key themes and patterns. The results of a thematic coding analysis revealed six key themes: (a) leadership focus, (b) communication, (c) strategic management, (d) voice-of-the-customer, (e) financial management, and (f) product research and development.

The themes uncovered from the data collection could provide insight to other leaders of small businesses on strategies to improve their systematic processes, thus positively contributing to business practices and positive social change. Leaders of small businesses with limited capacity and capabilities could embrace a double-loop learning approach to develop and execute strategic processes that enhance organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Leaders of small businesses could use the findings to develop strategies that strengthen their financial position, create new diverse revenue streams, and develop innovative products that satisfy the changing needs of the stakeholders. Moreover, the findings could benefit society by improving their self-awareness and understanding of the needs and demands of stakeholders, formulating products with environmentally friendly ingredients, and finding solutions to stakeholder problems. Leaders of small businesses could gain insight from the findings and find opportunities to improve operational efficiencies, thus economically benefiting their communities. Leaders who improve performance, experience growth, and gain a competitive advantage help create jobs in their communities and help their local economies thrive. Ultimately, the findings from this study provide leaders of small businesses with insight into developing strategies that will help them overcome the challenges of competing in a competitive global market and work towards achieving organizational excellence and a sustainably profitable future.

Contributions and Recommendations

All leaders of small businesses face challenges they must learn to overcome to sustain their operations in a globally competitive market. Some challenges that could hinder operations include limited working capital, resources, capabilities, and capacity (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020). To successfully develop and execute change, leaders must learn adaptiveness and agility to thrive in challenging and volatile environments and ensure their organization's lasting success (Heifetz et al., 2009). Organizational learning is vital for leaders to systematically evaluate and challenge their organization's design and acquire actionable knowledge to correct system errors (Argyris, 2007). By transforming from a single- to double-loop mindset, leaders could access, share, and transfer the knowledge required to adapt, reconfigure, and leverage their resources, thus improving their dynamic capabilities, performance, growth, and competitive advantage

(Apascaritei & Elvira, 2021). The leaders of NK could develop their strategic focus by embracing a double-loop learning mindset and acquiring the knowledge and competencies to systematically improve their organization's design. By integrating learning into their culture, the leadership team at NK gains insight beyond the symptoms of the problem and develops and executes changes to the strategic management design that targets the root cause of the problem.

Leaders of small businesses could use the findings from this study to gain insight into the advantages of integrating organizational learning to improve operational efficiencies, thus positively impacting business practices and promoting positive social change. Through learning, leaders acquire the knowledge to evaluate strategic decisions and create a roadmap to guide their efforts in achieving lasting success (Kools & George, 2020). Furthermore, through double-loop learning, leaders can enhance their capabilities and transform their strategic plans into actionable measures that improve performance (Friesl et al., 2021). The leaders of NK could continue to use learning to question their practices, governance systems, and strategic design to support their strategic efforts and continuously improve their processes, thus improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Through double-loop learning, the leadership team at NK could acquire the knowledge and resources to continuously improve their (a) leadership focus, (b) communication, (c) strategic management, (d) branding, (e) voice-of-the-customer, (f) financial management, and (g) product research and development.

The findings from this case study offer rich insight for leaders of small businesses on strategies to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Leaders of small businesses could see the benefit of using the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) as a strategic tool to gain a holistic understanding of their operations and find opportunities for improvements. Moreover, because learning is a core function of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program Assessment, leaders of small businesses could identify how to evolve their thinking and embrace double-loop learning to find sustainable solutions to their business problems. Therefore, leaders could integrate learning into their (a) leadership focus, (b) communication, (c) strategic management, voice-of-the-customer, (d) financial management, and (e) product research and development strategies to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Application to Professional Practice

The findings from this qualitative single case study could benefit leaders of small organizations to identify strategies to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Although a vast body of academic literature identifies strategic improvement initiatives, many leaders of small businesses lack the resources and capabilities to effectively improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The results from this study highlight different strategies that could help leaders understand their environment and stakeholders and improve processes. Innovation stems from the leader's ability to effectively identify and execute performance-enhancement initiatives (Alsafadi & Altahat, 2021). The analysis revealed six strategies leaders could use to help improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Moreover, the findings from this study highlight the importance of organizational learning when evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and finding areas of improvement. For example, leadership focus is vital to developing and executing a strategic plan to improve competitiveness and sustainability. Leaders could also draw on the findings of this study to understand the importance of adequate communication to ensure operational efficiencies and productivity. Additionally, strategic management is a vital process in which the leadership team formulates and effectively executes its plan by strategically allocating its resources (Dyer et al., 2020). Leaders who treat strategic management as a continuous ongoing process become proactive in managing and executing strategies to achieve strategic objectives that align with the organization's mission, vision, and values.

Furthermore, listening to the voice-of-the-customer is imperative to understand the needs, demands of the stakeholder, and use learning to adjust their processes to continuously satisfy the demand. Learning and adapting strategies based on the voice-of-the-customer is integral for leaders to improve proactivity and responsiveness based on stakeholder preference (Kim & Lim, 2021). Leaders of small businesses could also draw on the findings of this case study to understand the importance of adequate financial management and research and development to sustain profitable business practices. Lastly, leaders of small businesses could see the value of using a strategic tool, such as the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), to holistically evaluate their organization's design and find systematic and sustainable solutions to enhance organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage.

Implications for Social Change

Learning is fundamental to help leaders of small businesses acquire, share, and diffuse the knowledge required to improve capabilities, thus, improving performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Argyris (1991) identified that a leader's success in their business endeavors depends on their ability to learn. Leaders transitioning from a single- to double-loop mindset embrace learning to challenge their practices and systematically uncover solutions to optimize their operations. Through acquiring knowledge, leaders can gain valuable insight into incorporating performance improvement strategies. Moreover, by embracing organizational learning, leaders of small businesses create a culture that supports the development of their workforce, thus promoting employee empowerment and engagement (Eliyana et al., 2019). Employees who receive the tools and resources to develop their capabilities are encouraged to work harder to help achieve strategic goals (Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). Leaders who embed learning into their culture create a strategy to enhance agility (Wassem et al., 2019), thus improving processes, thriving, and economically benefiting their communities. Leaders could use learning to evaluate and refine their organization's design and strategies to promote sustainability. Using natural, nonharsh ingredients contributes to green initiatives that focus on protecting the environment and ecosystems, thus contributing to the health of individuals and the planet. Additionally, leaders could use learning to understand their communities' social and financial needs, help create jobs, and stimulate the economy.

Moreover, the findings from this study promote positive social change by filling a gap in current literature and encouraging future research. Published case studies facilitate discussion in the research community (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Researchers could gain insight into the data collection and analysis techniques, thus contributing to learning and encouraging further exploration into the business phenomenon (Alam, 2021). Therefore, researchers could draw from the findings of this study and identify future research opportunities, thus contributing to the learning and growth of the research community. Researchers could expand on the findings from this study to uncover additional strategies to help leaders improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage, and promote positive social change.

Recommendations for Action

The results from this qualitative single case study could be helpful to leaders of small businesses trying to overcome sustainability challenges in a globally competitive business environment. Particularly, the leadership team at NK could use double-loop learning and use the findings from this study to develop actionable strategies based on their opportunities for improvement to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Considering this small for-profit organization's limited capacity and resources, it is essential to consider the time, capabilities, and funding required to execute the strategies. Firstly, I recommend that the leaders at NK continue using the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) as a strategic tool to evaluate their stakeholder systems and monitor their progress from reacting to problems to achieving aligned approaches. Moreover, through double-loop learning, the leaders could use the Baldrige

Performance Excellence Program as a guide to improve from the early reacting stage to high-performing and innovative.

Secondly, the leaders of NK could consider developing a progress-tracking system, such as using a live dashboard to help track performance and progress toward achieving strategic objectives. A tracking system could help improve leadership focus because leaders must identify and prioritize their strategic initiatives. Monitoring and managing progress encourage accountability and help the leaders track performance and the effectiveness of their actions when executing their strategic plan. By embracing learning into their culture, the leaders could develop and implement strategic initiatives and identify innovative opportunities that will help them create value for their stakeholders and gain a competitive advantage (Bocken & Geradts, 2020). Therefore, I recommend the leader of NK continue collaborating each week to develop strategic initiatives that align with the organization's mission, vision, and values. Additionally, I recommend that the leaders acquire the knowledge and competencies to effectively improve their strategic focus to prioritize and execute actionable strategies.

Third, the leaders of NK could develop processes to capture the voice-of-the-customer and analyze the data to take intelligent risks, thus enhancing performance. By enabling the review feature on their online shopping platform and encouraging customers to fill out post-service surveys, the leadership team can gather valuable data on customer preferences and expectations and find opportunities to improve products and services. Moreover, by engaging customers on their social media platforms, the leaders could gain insight and exploit innovative opportunities to create new products and enhance customer experience. Capturing and analyzing voice-of-the-customer data allows leaders to respond proactively to customer inquiries, concerns, and complaints, thus improving responsiveness, customer confidence, and satisfaction (Kim & Lim, 2021). Therefore, I recommend that the leadership team at NK acquire the knowledge to develop processes to collect and analyze the voice-of-the customer to optimize the customer's experience to improve performance and gain a competitive advantage.

Fourth, I recommend that the leaders consider using financial management software to help monitor and manage their financial performance. Financial management is vital for leaders to understand and control their costs, plan for production, forecast future performance, and manage their resources to ensure sustainability (Krüger & Meyer, 2021). By embracing double-loop learning, the leaders could identify gaps in their current design and find opportunities to reduce costs, increase revenues, and achieve higher levels of profitability. Additionally, using the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), the leaders could holistically evaluate their performance results and embrace learning to transition from reactive to aligned and integrated.

Lastly, I recommend that the leaders identify adequate communication strategies to share and transfer the owner's knowledge, expertise, and proprietary information to other organization leaders to improve agility and resilience and ensure business continuity. The leaders should also consider developing a succession plan that identifies how they will identify and train the next generation of leaders. Businesses that are family owned have unique cultures based on family dynamics (Arambhan & Seetharaman, 2022); therefore, finding effective strategies to mentor, transfer knowledge, and prepare the next generation of leaders is vital to ensuring the organization's lasting success (Batool et al., 2022). Communication is essential to learning; therefore, by encouraging the leaders to participate in discussion actively, they can access the knowledge to improve their competencies, thus improving operational efficiencies and sustainability.

The findings from this study could benefit senior leaders of small for-profit organizations wanting to explore strategies to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. I will provide my client organization’s senior leaders with a copy of this case study for their review and consideration. The leaders of NK could share the findings with other leaders of small businesses who struggle in developing, implementing, and managing strategic initiatives to optimize operational efficiencies. I will disseminate the results of this study by publishing and making the study available in academic journal databases, speaking at conferences, and hosting training seminars. Based on the knowledge, experience, and expertise gained from this consulting experience, I could offer my services by speaking at academic presentations to discuss the findings and recommendations. I could also facilitate discussions with leaders of small businesses to help find sustainable solutions for their business problems and help promote positive social change. Because the results indicate the synergy between single- and double-loop learning and the Baldrige Excellence Framework, leaders of business, Baldrige examiners, and researchers could explore and understand how single- and double-loop learning can help systematically improve performance.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. This case study addressed gaps in academic and professional literature regarding strategies leaders of small businesses use to ensure sustainability and thrive in competitive markets. There were limitations to this qualitative case study that created opportunities for future research. Additional research could help uncover strategies leaders of small businesses use in other industries and other geographic locations to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Alternately, a longitudinal study could help researchers explore and understand how leaders transitioned to a double-loop mindset to systematically improve their organization's design while satisfying the needs of their key stakeholder groups. Moreover, researchers could use a different lens to view the business problem, thus providing a complementary and robust view of the phenomenon. Lastly, I recommend future research to understand how double-loop learning supports the Baldrige Performance Excellence Performance Program Framework to help leaders shift their mindset to systematically improve their operations.

Reflections

As an independent scholar in the consulting capstone program, I gained first-hand experience of the richness and challenges of working with a client organization. Completing this single case study allowed me to gain a robust understanding of the complexities of a business phenomenon and acquire the knowledge and skills to develop my professional capabilities. Throughout the doctoral process, I learned to embrace imposter syndrome, efficiently searched academic literature, developed my capabilities, and helped my client leader find sustainable solutions to their business problem. I understood that I could have implicit and personal biases that could impact this study. For instance, my facial expressions and non-verbal language sometimes speak louder than my words, and my high-energy, high-performing personality could be intense for certain individuals. Through reflective journalling and practice, I learned to control my expressions and understood that everyone performs at different calibers. I found strategies to offer my client leaders unbiased and productive advice to help them improve their processes. Furthermore, working alongside a client organization helped me develop my emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Using the 40-week term plan allowed me to develop a positive and meaningful relationship with my client leader and develop my leadership skills to help them with their operations.

I am grateful to my doctoral chair, who supported, guided, and motivated me to set and achieve ambitious goals. The feedback and weekly meetings helped hold me accountable and grow as an independent scholar and professional. I learned a great deal from my doctoral chair and am excited to use the knowledge and expertise acquired through this journey in the next chapter of my career. I developed a passion for consulting and promoting positive social change by helping leaders of businesses identify and find sustainable solutions to their business problems. As a result of working with the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021), I enrolled to complete the Certified Excellence Professional program, the Canadian equivalent of the Baldrige program.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies leaders of small businesses use to improve organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage. The success and sustainability of small business operations is vital to the world economy. A leader's ability to develop, implement, and manage operations is integral to optimizing performance and remaining competitive in a global market. I used the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (2021) to gain a holistic understanding of my client organization's key stakeholder systems. Leaders of small businesses could choose to adopt strategies such as (a) leadership focus; (b) communication; (c) strategic management, (d) voice-of-the-customer; (e) financial management; and (f) product research and development to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Moreover, by embracing learning and integrating Argyris's (1976) double-loop learning approach, leaders can use learning to challenge organizational values and cultures and acquire, share, transfer, and diffuse the knowledge required to improve agility and resilience, thus promoting organizational excellence.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. I contacted participants via text message to schedule an interview based on a time that is convenient for them. Once I confirmed a date and time, I sent a meeting request with the Zoom link. I sent a courtesy reminder to the participant the day before the interview.
2. At the beginning of the interview, I introduced myself, stated the purpose of the interview, confirmed participant consent, requested permission to record the interview, and explained member checking and confidentiality protocols. I used the following script to introduce the interview and set the stage:

    Hello (participant name). I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today and aggreging to participate in this interview. I am Julie Charette, a scholar consultant in the DBA Consulting Capstone Program at Walden University. The purpose of my research is to understand strategies some leaders of small for-profit organizations use to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. Your contributions today allow me to gain rich insight into the phenomenon and positively contribute to the field of research. The findings from this study could give leaders of other organizations insight into best practices that help them improve strategic processes and positively contribute to business practices.

    Could you kindly confirm that I received a signed copy of your consent form? Do you have any questions regarding the consent form before we proceed?

I want to record this interview and transcribe our discussion. Anything discussed today will remain confidential, and I will use pseudonyms to mask participant and organization names and redact any identifiable information. Please note that you have the right to refuse to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. You also have the right to stop the interview at any time. In the week following the discussion, I will provide you with a copy of the transcription to allow you to revise and modify your answers as required. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

During the interview, I will ask questions about strategies you used to help your organization improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage. I have eight questions for you to answer, and the interview should take approximately 30 minutes. Do you have any questions before we proceed?

3. Begin audio recording.
4. Ask participant interview questions:
    1. What strategies did you use to help improve your organization's performance, growth, and competitive advantage?
    2. What strategies were the most effective for improving organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage?
    3. How did you implement the strategies for improving organizational performance, growth, and competitive advantage?
    4. What were the primary barriers when implementing employee engagement strategies?

5. How did you address those primary barriers when implementing performance improvement, growth, and competitive advantage strategies?
6. How do you measure the effectiveness of performance, growth, and competitive advantage strategies?
7. What modifications have you made to improve performance, growth, and competitive advantage strategies?
8. What more would you like to tell me about your strategies to help improve your organization's performance, growth, and competitive advantage?

I listened and observed participants for verbal and nonverbal cues during the interview. I paraphrased as needed and asked follow-up and probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of the participant’s experiences.

5. I wrapped up the interview by thanking the participant and explaining the next steps. I used the following script to conclude the interview:

> That was the last question I had for you. Do you have any questions before we end our call? Thank you for your time and participation today. I will review and prepare the transcripts of our discussion. I will follow up with you via text message and send you a copy of the transcripts via email next week for your review. Please feel free to add, clarify, revise, or redact the information as required. Do not hesitate to contact me with additional questions or concerns. Thank you for your time and have a great day.

Appendix B: Preapproved Data Sources for the Consulting Capstone

This appendix contains a list of data sources that the Walden University Institutional Review Board has preapproved for the Doctor of Business Administration Consulting Capstone program.

Data source	Description
Public data (reports, websites)	Media coverage, publicly disseminated reports, public websites, and any information available to the public
Client organization's internal archival data (records, documents, and artifacts) [a]	Client organization's internal operational records, personnel records, meeting minutes, digital/audio/video recordings created by site, training materials, protocols, manuals, reports, agreements, surveys that were collected by site leadership, internal web postings (where access is limited to staff only), and other internal documents
Literature as data	Books, peer-reviewed articles, and other bodies of written knowledge that communicate substantive research findings about practices that are relevant to the inquirer's topic
Interviews of senior leadership	Using the interview consent form template, students may conduct face-to-face, phone, or video interviews with senior leaders individually or in small groups. No one may be interviewed in the presence of another person above or below him in the organization (due to confidentiality standards – findings are to be shared but not "who said what"). These interviews can be audio-recorded but not video-recorded. The doctoral student may not use recordings for purposes other than the consulting capstone. Recordings must be turned over to the interviewee if requested.

[a] Internal data are what the client organization's leadership team deems fit to share with scholar-consultants (as per confidentiality terms in the manual for the DBA consulting capstone).

Appendix C: Research Agreement Between Walden University and [Research Partner]

Note to doctoral students selected for the consulting capstone option: The University has entered into the following agreement with each site that agrees to host consulting capstone students. As a representative of Walden University, it is important that you review and comply with the terms of this agreement. **IMPORTANT: You are not to obtain signatures for this document. Walden University has already obtained the appropriate signatures for approved consulting sites.**

THIS AGREEMENT (the "Agreement") is made and entered into on this XXX date (the "Effective Date") by and between WALDEN UNIVERSITY, LLC, located at 100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 900, Minneapolis, MN 55401 ("Walden") and [RESEARCH PARTNER NAME] located at [ADDRESS] ("Institution").

RECITALS

WHEREAS, Walden offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs and seeks to partner with institutions to allow Walden doctoral students (the "Students") to receive academic credit for work on research projects ("Research").

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the mutual promises and covenants hereinafter set forth it is understood and agreed upon by the parties hereto, as follows:

I. TERM AND TERMINATION

This Agreement shall commence on the Effective Date and shall continue for a period of three (3) years (the "Initial Term"). Upon expiration of the Initial Term of this Agreement, this Agreement and the Term shall renew for successive one (1) year periods (each a "Renewal Term"). Notwithstanding the foregoing, either party may terminate this Agreement for any reason or no reason, upon ninety (90) calendar days' prior written notice to the other party. In the event of termination or expiration of this Agreement before a participating Student(s) has completed the Research, such Student(s) shall be permitted to complete the Research subject to the applicable terms of this Agreement, which shall survive for such Research until the date of completion.

II. RESEARCH

A. Institution and Walden may, from time-to-time, agree that selected Students, if accepted by Institution, may participate in Research with Institution. Walden shall be responsible for referring Students to the Institution and will instruct Students to provide Institution with a description of the Research. Walden agrees to refer to the Institution only those Students who have completed the required prerequisite course of study as determined by Walden. The parties anticipate that all Research will be done remotely and that Students will not be present at Institution's facilities.

B. Walden and Institution will conduct their activities hereunder in compliance with their respective policies and all applicable laws and regulations. In the event that any regulatory compliance issues arise, the parties will cooperate in good faith in any review conducted by the other party.

C. Where applicable, the Institution shall provide the Student with an orientation familiarizing student with all applicable State and Federal laws and regulations that pertain to the Research with the Institution, which may include those pertaining to Standards for Privacy of Individually Identifiable Health Information (the "Privacy Rule") issued under the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 ("HIPAA"), which govern the use and/or disclosure of individually identifiable health information.

D. The Institution reserves the right to dismiss at any time any Student whose health condition, conduct or performance is a detriment to the Student's ability to successfully complete the Research at the Institution or jeopardizes the health, safety or well-being of any patients, clients, or employees of the Institution. The Institution shall promptly notify Walden of any problem or difficulty arising with a Student and a discussion shall be held either by telephone or in person to determine the appropriate course of action. The Institution will, however, have final responsibility and authority to dismiss any Student from Institution.

E. The Institution and Walden shall each maintain general liability insurance (or comparable coverage under a program of self-insurance) for itself and its employees with a single limit of no less than One Million Dollars ($1,000,000) per occurrence and Three Million Dollars ($3,000,000) annual aggregate. Each party shall provide the other party with proof of coverage upon request.

III. STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

A. The Student shall agree to abide by the rules, regulations, policies, and procedures of the Institution as provided to Student by the Institution during their orientation at the Institution and shall abide by the requirements of all applicable laws.

B. If applicable, the Student shall agree to comply with the Standards for Privacy of Individually Identifiable Health Information (the "Privacy Rule") issued under the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 ("HIPAA"), which govern the use and/or disclosure of individually identifiable health information.

C. The Student shall arrange for and provide to Institution any information requested by Institution including, but not limited to, criminal background checks, health information, verification of certification and/or licensure, insurance information and information relating to participation in federally funded insurance programs.

IV. MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITIES

A. FERPA. For purposes of this Agreement, pursuant to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 ("FERPA"), the parties acknowledge and agree that the Institution has an educational interest in the educational records of the Student participating in the Program and to the extent that access to Student's records are required by the Institution in order to carry out the Research. Institution and Walden shall only disclose such educational records in compliance with FERPA.

B. HIPAA. The parties agree that, if the Institution is a covered entity under HIPAA:

(1) Where a Student is participating in Research that will require access to Protected Health Information:

(a) Student shall be considered part of Institution's workforce for HIPAA compliance purposes in accordance with 45 CFR §160.103, but shall not otherwise be construed to be employees of Institution;

(b) Student shall receive training by the Institution on, and subject to compliance with, all of Institution's privacy policies adopted pursuant to HIPAA; and

(c) Student shall not disclose any Protected Health Information, as that term is defined by 45 CFR §164.105, to which a Student has access through program participation that has not first been de-identified as provided in 45 CFR §164.514(a);

(2) Walden will never access or request to access any Protected Health Information held or collected by or on behalf of the Institution that has not first been de-identified as provided in 45 CFR §164.514(a); and

(3) No services are being provided to the Institution by Walden pursuant to this Agreement and therefore this Agreement does not create a "business associate" relationship as that term is defined in 45 CFR §160.103.

C. Publications. Students and Walden are free to publish, present, or use any results arising out of the Research for their own academic, instructional, research, or publication purposes. Students shall submit a draft of any proposed publication to Institution at least ten (10) business days prior to submission for publication, presentation, or use. To the extent Institution requires that Students enter into nondisclosure or confidentiality agreements, such agreements shall be subject to this Section allowing publication of Research results.

D. Institution and Walden will promote a coordinated effort by evaluating the Research at mutually agreeable times, planning for its continuous improvement, making such changes as are deemed advisable and discussing problems as they arise concerning this affiliation.

E. The parties agree that Students are at all times acting as independent contractors and that Students are not and will not be considered employees of the Institution or any of its subsidiaries or affiliates by virtue of a Student's participation in the Research and shall not as a result of Student's participation in the Research, be entitled to compensation, remuneration or benefits of any kind.

F. Institution and Walden agree that Student will have equal access to their respective programs and facilities without regard for gender identity, race, color, sex, age, religion or creed, marital status, disability, national or ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, veteran status, sexual orientation, or other legally protected status. Institution and Walden will comply with all applicable non-discrimination laws in providing services hereunder.

G. The terms and conditions of this Agreement may only be amended by written instrument executed by both parties.

H. This Agreement is nonexclusive. The Institution and Walden reserve the right to enter into similar agreements with other institutions.

I. This Agreement shall be governed by the laws of the State of Minnesota.

J. Any notice required hereunder shall be sent by certified or registered mail, return receipt requested and shall be deemed given upon deposit thereof in the U.S. mail (postage prepaid). Notices to Walden shall be sent to Jenny Sherer, Office of Research Ethics and Compliance; 100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 900; Minneapolis MN 55401 with a copy to: Walden University, LLC; Attention: Assistant Divisional Counsel; 650 South Exeter Street; Baltimore, MD 21202.

K. Each party agrees to indemnify, defend, and hold harmless the other from all losses or liabilities resulting from the negligent acts or omissions of the indemnifying party and/or its employees or agents arising out of the performance or the terms and conditions of this Agreement, except to the extent such losses or liabilities are caused by the indemnified party's negligence or willful misconduct.

L. This Agreement sets forth the entire understanding of the parties hereto and supersedes any and all prior agreements, arrangements, and understandings, oral or written, of any nature whatsoever, between the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof. This Agreement and any amendments hereto may be executed in counterparts and all such counterparts taken together shall be deemed to constitute one and the same instrument. The parties agree that delivery of an executed counterpart signature hereof by facsimile transmission, or in "portable document format" (".pdf") form, or by any other electronic means intended to preserve the original graphic and pictorial appearance of a document, will have the same effect as physical delivery of the paper document bearing the original signature.

SIGNATURE PAGE FOLLOWS

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties hereto have duly executed this Agreement, effective the date first above written:

WALDEN UNIVERSITY, LLC	INSTITUTION
By: ___________________________	By: ___________________________
(signature)	(signature)
Name: ________________________	Name: ________________________
(Print name)	(Print name)
Title: _________________________	Title: _________________________
Date: _________________________	Date: ____________________