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Leadership Development Strategies for Sustaining Organization Performance Through the Upper Echelon Theory

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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Through the Upper Echelon Theory

by

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MA, Information Systems, Webster University, 2003

MA, Procurement and Acquisition, Webster University, 2014

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Organizational leaders within the Department of the Army in the Military District of Washington frequently experience turnover that necessitates a new leader's transition into a position. These new leaders sometimes experience challenges in successfully transitioning into the organization to maintain the continuity of operations. Grounded in the upper echelon theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore strategies senior leaders use to transition new subordinate leaders into their organization successfully. The participants included eight military and civilian leaders with more than eight years of knowledge and experience in employing effective strategies for developing midlevel managers. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and information in the public domain. Through thematic analysis, five themes emerged: (a) being knowledgeable of the organization during change, (b) employing effective communication skills, (c) being a flexible and adaptive leader, (d) employing measures of performance, and (e) formal and informal leader development. A key recommendation is for senior leaders to assess the performance of midlevel managers experiencing challenges with leading to identify areas needing tailored development. The implications for positive social change have the potential to enhance the organization's internal culture and extend a positive influence on the broader society.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my family and friends who supported me throughout my doctoral journey. A special thanks to my husband, Marshall, for his love, untiring support, sacrifices, and encouragement to maintain my momentum and never stop, even when the competing requirements seemed insurmountable. To my children, Alexia, Amber, and Courtney, and grandson Cameron, thank you for your love, encouragement, and understanding of the sacrifice of family time required to focus on my studies. To my siblings, Eddy, Leslie, and Wendell, thank you for your love, inspiration, and encouragement to reach my goal. To my friends, thank you for your motivation to maintain the course and to make it to the finish line. I culminate my doctoral journey and this dedication with profound gratitude and humility to God for his divine light, strength, and wisdom.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

- Organizations within the Department of the Army in the Military District of Washington (MDW) experience turnover of leaders frequently. According to a 2021 Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) survey, the turnover rate of corporate leaders increased from 14% to 18% during the COVID-19 pandemic (Segal, 2021) and may continue to rise. Wang and Sun (2021) considered leader turnover as one of the most significant events in the lifecycle of an organization because of the new leader's influence to change the strategic direction, decisions, and overall performance of the organization (Kim et al., 2021; Wang & Sun, 2022). These leaders in the Army include midlevel managers. Civilian midlevel manager turnover, like any employee turnover, is due to various reasons, including pay, lack of job satisfaction, growth opportunity, lateral transfer, or retirement (Smart & Peterson, 1997). Turnover necessitates the transition of new personnel into the organization to backfill vacant or newly established positions. Duty positions applicable to this study included midlevel managers who fill positions as department heads, regional managers, division deputies, branch managers, branch chiefs, branch leads, and supervisors. This management level is between senior leadership and direct reports, with responsibilities of bridging the gap between the strategic decisions of top leadership with the tactical level (Fannon et al., 2021).

- Midlevel managers in the MDW area typically have years of experience, have previously served in leadership positions, have undergraduate to postgraduate education, have previously received functional area and leadership training, and have ingrained beliefs and values (Karadag, 2022). These characteristics support the upper echelon theory (UET) that provided the framework for this study. The basis of the concept is that leaders with specific characteristics (experience, education, age, gender, beliefs, values, personality), cognition, mental behavior, and information processing impact strategic choice, decision-making, and capability development (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hashim, 2022; Jia et al., 2021).
- This study included extending the application of UET that focuses on the traits of senior leaders to midlevel managers in their multifaceted roles (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Garces-Galdeano et al., 2021; Hambrick, 2007; Singh et al., 2019). Based on the same traits, some midlevel managers transition into organizations with preconceived notions about how they will lead, make decisions, interact with employees, and develop strategies for daily operations (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Midlevel managers may be reluctant to self-reflect or refine their leadership approach to align with the work environment. Their diverse traits may directly affect organizational performance (Kaur & Singh, 2019).

- Change is constant in dynamic and fast-paced environments with high turnover, creating uncertainty. The way in which new midlevel managers transition into an organization, which is change, can swing the pendulum of employees' acceptance and behavior from positive to negative. Employees expect midlevel managers to catalyze successful operations by providing direction, guidance, fairness, respect, recognition, and professional development, as well as by serving as role models (Hsin-Hua & Chia-Ju, 2021). Unfortunately, not all midlevel managers project positive influence; when they fail to do so, results include disruption, resistance to change, and employee dissatisfaction (Abalkhail, 2022). This study focused on leadership development strategies from senior leaders to help minimize disruption and affect a successful transition of new subordinate leaders into the organization.

Problem and Purpose

- Leader turnover is a link to disruption, turbulence, and organizational instability (Lokke & Sorensen, 2021). The turnover rate of corporate leaders increased from 14% to 18% in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Segal, 2021) and may continue to rise. The general business problem is the absence or ineffective implementation of strategies by senior leaders to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of employee engagement, processes, and workflow. The specific business problem is that some senior leaders lack strategies for transitioning new subordinate leaders into the organization to maintain the continuity of operations.

- The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to explore strategies used by senior leaders to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of operations. The research methodology was qualitative, and the pragmatic inquiry design included semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The target population included six senior leaders who supervised midlevel leaders. The geographical location was the Department of the Army in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The study may contribute to social change as the results may provide insight into new leaders transitioning into an organization and their strategies for decision-making and implementing actions. These strategies can affect how employees respond and whether the new leader's actions can sustain operations or create organizational instability. The recommendation that derived from the study may benefit other organizations that experience leader turnover. The suggestions may help other researchers who want to leverage the conceptual framework of UET in their research about leader characteristics, strategies, organizational turnover, and organization sustainability.

Population and Sampling

- The population of this qualitative study consisted of eight military and civilian senior leaders from the Department of the Army in the Washington, DC metropolitan area who had used effective strategies for developing midlevel managers. The participants had direct and personal knowledge of leadership development strategies that would enable them to provide information to address the research question (Gill, 2020). There are many factors that a researcher must consider when choosing a sampling method, such as the study's research question, methodology, design, knowledge and size of the population, and resource constrictions (Berndt, 2020).
- Researchers use nonprobability sampling methods in qualitative research, such as criterion, purposive, snowball, convenience, self-selection, and quota, for nonprobability strategies (Gill, 2020; Mthuli et al., 2022). The criterion sampling method includes identifying specific criteria deemed necessary. The snowball sampling method focuses on networking and referrals (Parker et al., 2019). The researcher selects the initial participants who know the study topic and fit the criteria. Upon the researcher's request, the participants provide names of potential participants whom they believe will fit the criteria. The convenience sampling method includes the researcher announcing the study and participants self-selecting to participate (Stratton, 2021). The participants are easy to locate

and collect data from. Researchers use convenience sampling in qualitative or clinical research. The self-selection sampling method consists of volunteers who respond to a researcher's specified criteria and is often used in psychological research and surveys (Berndt, 2020). The quota sampling method provides greater flexibility as it specifies categories and the minimum number of cases required (Campbell et al., 2020). This method relies on a predetermined number or proportion of units and controls that makeup of the sample. This study employed a purposive sampling method to identify the study participants as it was best suited to address the aims and objectives of the study.

- The purposive sampling method enables the use of a small and purposive sample size to achieve an in-depth understanding of a topic through the selection of respondents who can convey salient information (Campbell et al., 2020). The method relies on the researcher's judgment (Berndt, 2020). The basis for the purposive method is to intentionally align certain people with specific knowledge to the aims and objectives of the study (Mthuli et al., 2022). The advantage of purposive sampling is that the sample is homogeneous, which reduces the variant between-subject variance (Andrade, 2021). The participants for this study included eight military and civilian leaders with intimate knowledge and experience in employing effective strategies for developing midlevel managers. Although the sample size may have been small, this sampling method provided the most beneficial and rich information to understand the phenomenon. In qualitative research, the sample size does not dictate the point of saturation, instead when there is enough information to replicate the study.

- There is no standard method in qualitative research to estimate the exact saturation point. Researchers reach saturation during data collection and analysis when no new themes address the research question and the themes reoccur (Crick, 2021; Guest et al., 2020). According to Mthuli et al. (2022) and Mwita (2022), data saturation becomes evident as the study moves forward, and data from developing new categories and themes seize. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) argued that the researcher, will reach saturation between the ninth and 17th interviews. In this study, my intent was to reach saturation by interviewing eight senior leaders and obtaining information from public domain documents to help identify leader development strategies. I coordinated interviews at the time and location most convenient to the participants. I conducted interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions specifically designed to address the research question and objectives of the study. The interviews followed an interview protocol that included the questions and prompts used to interview participants and ensure consistency across the participants (Yin, 2018).

Nature of the Study

- The three research methods available to researchers are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed. A qualitative method describes or explores a contemporary case, one that is bound by time and place, with an awareness of related contexts (Boblin, 2013). Time and place bind a multiple-case study within each case and across cases (Keen & Collaborators, 2018). Qualitative research uses inductive reasoning, and interpretive philosophy, with meaning derived from the subjective accountings of individuals' experiences (Saunders et al., 2015). Quantitative research focuses on numbers, counting, predetermined variables, and the relationship between variables (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Deductive reasoning is applied in quantitative research, in which data are used for testing theory (Saunders et al., 2015). Mixed method research combines qualitative and quantitative techniques and analytical procedures. This research includes deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning for theory development (Saunders et al., 2015). Researchers can employ mixed-method research concurrently or sequentially.
- Quantitative and mixed method research were not preferable for this study because the focus was on individual interpretations. The qualitative research method includes subjective meanings derived from individuals' accounting of their attitudes, motivations, behavior, events, and situations. It entails understanding processes, experiences, and meanings that people

assign to things (Aspers & Corte, 2019). It provides the opportunity for one-on-one interaction using semi-structured open-ended questions during interviews. The qualitative research method aligned with my study in understanding organizational leaders' strategies for transitioning new leaders into an organization.

- Qualitative study designs include phenomenology, ethnography, case study, and pragmatic inquiry. Phenomenology focuses on how individuals experience a phenomenon and their feelings about it. It is a subjective model that, through the lens of the participant, is not confined to one reality as interpretation, perspectives, and observations (Saunders et al., 2015). Ethnography focuses on a specific grouping within a culture. This method requires heavy researcher engagement through direct observation and interaction with participants who belong to the culture of interest and share their perspectives (Ayesha et al., 2022). Case study is one of the most common qualitative designs focusing on a person, group, community, or institution (Yin, 2018). In this study, I used a bounded theory approach and drew upon multiple data sources, such as interviews and documents. All participants shared a standard direct or indirect connection to the research question or subject.
- Lastly, a pragmatic inquiry design is an interpretive description design that concentrates on a single decision-maker in a real-world scenario (Zettel & Garrett, 2023). The first steps in conducting a pragmatic inquiry study are

finding and understanding a problem in its broadest context. This step leads to a logical inquiry design, which involves thoroughly comprehending the issue and ultimately finding a solution. The study findings can lead to new environmental or social initiatives, policy recommendations, or both (Pinto, 2010). This study employed a qualitative methodology and a pragmatic inquiry design. This methodology and design allowed the use of multiple data sources, with a focus on a behavioral phenomenon through the lens of participants with direct knowledge of the phenomenon and work environment, which was most suitable for real-life issues.

Research Question

The research question was as follows: What effective strategies do senior leaders use to develop midlevel managers during their transition into an organization to sustain operations?

Interview Questions

1. How do changes in midlevel leaders impact organizational day-to-day operations, processes, and employee engagement in a dynamic, fast-paced work environment?
2. What is your perspective on how your midlevel leaders assimilate into daily operations and the organization's culture upon arrival?

3. What preconceived mindset or notions do new midlevel managers have on how to lead, make decisions, and manage employees upon arriving in the organization?
4. What effective leadership strategies do you use to help your midlevel managers transition into a dynamic, fast-paced organization?
5. What formal training or programs would you recommend for your midlevel managers before or after arriving at the organization?
6. What informal training or programs would you recommend for your midlevel managers before or after arriving at the organization?
7. What strategies would you recommend for a new midlevel manager to assimilate into the organizational culture (its mission, objectives, expectations, and values guiding its employees)?
8. How do you measure the effectiveness of your strategies for transitioning midlevel managers into your organization?
9. Through the employment of your strategies, how do the employees receive the new midlevel managers?
10. What else would you like to add regarding strategies to transition midlevel managers into an organization?

Conceptual Framework

- The UET was developed by Donald C. Hambrick and Phyllia A. Mason in 1984 and further updated by Hambrick in 2007. In the 1980s, after giving much attention to executives' sociodemographic features, Hambrick and

Mason published a conceptual framework that supported and coined the phrase "organizations become reflections of their top manager" (Abatecola & Cristofaro, 2020, p. 116). The theory derives from the seminal concept that the dominant coalition that surmised a firm's performance is the result of the top decision makers' collective choice (Cyert & March, 1963). Hambrick and Mason (1984) theorized that top executives view their situations through their highly personalized lens.

- The interconnection of two fundamental tenets is the underpinning for this theory. The first tenet is that interpretation of the external environment is the basis of leadership decisions. The second tenet is that leaders' interpretations are the basis for differences among executives, such as experiences, education, age, gender, values, personalities, and other human factors (Soren et al., 2022). The underlying assumption is that decision-making processes by leaders determine the strategies that affect organizational performance. This conceptual framework helped address the research question: What strategies do senior leaders use to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain sustainable operations?

Operational Definitions

Leader transition: The process by which one leader leaves a position and another leader steps into their place. This transition may last 6 to 9 months (Mondschein & Harrower, 2016).

Operational level: At this level, midlevel managers focus on human capital and those efforts required to support their employees, such as resource allocation, performance management, communication, professional development, continuous process improvement, and employee engagement.

Strategic level: At this level and in this environment, midlevel managers engage in shared leadership that can drive innovation and performance through a communal process of developing strategy, decision-making, and setting organizational goals (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2019).

Tactical level: This level supports the link between an organization's strategic vision and operational execution. At this level, midlevel managers translate strategic goals into actionable plans and initiatives (Iqbal et al., 2022).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

- Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations enable a researcher to provide transparency to aspects of a study that may not be apparent but may impact the analysis and outcome (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Neglecting, overlooking, or concealing these essential elements can jeopardize the quality and credibility of the study.

Assumptions

- Assumptions are ideas, beliefs, and presumptions that are assumed true but not validated (Grant & Radcliffe, 2015). Assumptions affect my ability to achieve research quality (Babchuk, 2019). Assumptions are required to enable and conduct research. These elements influence the credibility and validity of a study (FitzPatrick, 2019). If there is evidence to support an assumption, it is not an assumption, and I should support it with a citation. Four assumptions underpinned my study:

1. The leaders would provide truthful and relevant information that should advance scholarly and practitioner understanding of the research problem.
2. Human resource managers would grant access to authoritative documents that could add knowledge about strategies to enhance leadership development.
3. The study should enable the development of strategies for leadership development.
4. My knowledge of leadership development strategies would not create bias and would enable a neutral position throughout the study.

Limitations

- Limitations are weaknesses of a study that are outside my control and can affect the study's outcome and findings (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). I am responsible for divulging any known limitations that can impact a study (Shahriari & Rasuli, 2020). This study had four limitations: (a) the possibility that participants would not recall or be transparent with identifying strategies for leadership development,

  (b) the use of a pragmatic study with a limited sample size of eight participants and limited diversity in participants' demographics, (c) the use of a targeted location of the Washington, DC metropolitan area, and (d) the possibility that the organization would intentionally limit the contents of the substantiating authoritative document or limit the reflection of the thoughts and opinions of the organization's employees.

Delimitations

- Delimitations are an accounting of the logic that clarifies the research design parameters and supports the framework (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Delimitations are boundaries determined by me to establish the scope of a study (Babchuk, 2019). I set the study's parameters to maintain the focus on the study's aims and objectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This study had three delimitations:

  (a) senior leaders currently supervising midlevel managers with over 5 years of experience in that capacity, (b) the use of eight senior military and civilian leaders as participants, and (c) the geographical location selected for the study (the Washington, DC metropolitan area).

Significance of the Study

- This study is significant because some senior leaders lack strategies to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of operations (Kim et al., 2021). The turnover rate of corporate leaders increased from 14% to 18% in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it continues to rise (Farah et al., 2020; Segal, 2021). Wang and Sun (2021) considered leader turnover as one of the most significant events in the lifecycle of an organization because of the new leader's influence to change the strategic direction, decisions, and overall performance of the organization (Kim et al., 2021; Wang & Sun, 2022). These strategies for developing new leaders can make a difference in maintaining the continuity of operations with no impact, minimum impact, or significant impact that can be disruptive and cause turmoil, impacting personnel, processes, and procedures (Ren et al., 2020).

- The findings of the study may (a) help organization leaders assist midlevel managers in transitioning into the organization with little to no turmoil through leader development tailored to the needs of the transitioning leader and the organization; (b) benefit other organizations that experience leader turnover and the unique mindset of new leaders, and the strategies new leaders use as demonstrated by their decisions and actions; and (c) help other researchers who want to leverage the conceptual framework of the UET into their research that suggests that organizations and their strategies reflect their leadership based on their personal experiences, values, and personalities (Adobor et al., 2021).

Contribution to Business Practice

- The research results should provide leaders with insights on identifying strategies to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of operations. The findings from this study may benefit other dynamic organizations that experience constant change and leader turnover and that encounter leader attributes characterized by the conceptual framework of the UET that may not align with the organizational culture or goals, as well as organizations seeking refinement of strategies that new leaders use as demonstrated by their decisions and actions.

Implications for Social Change

- This study's findings could promote positive social change within the boundaries of an organization by implementing change that can enhance employee well-being and citizenship, social norms, and values, while improving organizational processes. Effective and credible leadership enhances employee-value proposition, increases employee commitment, and fosters goodwill among employees, contributing to them being more adaptive to change and willing to volunteer in activities with positive social implications.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

- A literature review enables me to provide a thorough overview of the knowledge already available on a particular subject or issue, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the development of ideas, arguments, trends, and gaps in the field of study (Paul & Criado, 2020). By reviewing existing literature, I was able to situate my research within the current body of knowledge and demonstrate how my work builds upon, adds to, or diverges from existing research (Snyder, 2019).

- This qualitative, pragmatic inquiry study explored strategies that senior leaders use to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain sustainable operations. I present the literature review under the following topic headings: (a) Upper Echelon Theory, (b) Contrasting Theories, (c) Midlevel Manager Level and Responsibilities, (d) Midlevel Manager Transition, (e) Midlevel Manager Competencies and Skills, and (f) Midlevel Manager Development. I collected academic and professional information from the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. I used databases, including ABI/INFORM Collection, Academic Search Complete, Business Market Research Collection, Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost, Emerald Management, ProQuest Central, and SAGE Journals.
- The key terms used in my search included upper echelon theory, transformational leadership theory, transactional leadership theory, contingency leadership theory, leadership attributes, leadership transition, leader/leadership development, succession planning, leader sustainability, leader behavior, continuity, midlevel manager, and middle managers. My data sources included primarily peer-reviewed references dated between 2019 and 2023. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the academic and professional sources used in the study.

Table 1

Literature Review Content

Sources	Total #	Pre 2019	2019–2023	% total (2019–2023)
Books	8	4	4	50%
Dissertations	2	0	2	100%
Government resources	3	1	2	67%
Public databases	1	0	1	100%
Peer-reviewed articles	102	16	87	84%
Total	116	21	96	83%

Note. Table 1 illustrates the category and number of references used in the literate review.

Upper Echelon Theory

- The UET emerged from the seminal work of Hambrick and Mason framed around their adage, "Organizations become reflections of their top manager" (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, p. 1). Through an upper echelon lens, the theory suggests predicting organizational outcomes by the CEO and top management team (TMT) characteristics and attitudes (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Sozen, 2022). The path to determining the outcome of organizations could include identifying opportunities, threats, alternatives, and the likelihood of outcomes (Berisha & Miftari, 2022). The CEO and TMT in organizations are the intellectual heads responsible for determining strategy, giving strategic direction, driving innovation, and taking those actions that provide a competitive advantage on an enduring basis (Baofeng et al., 2021; Gross, 2019). Leaders understand the positive relationship between innovation and competitive advantage and will likely drive change based on their experience and other characteristics. The CEO and TMT characteristics (experience, education, age, gender, beliefs, values, personality), cognition, mental behavior, and information processing have an impact on strategic choice, decision-making, and capability development through reflective capacity (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hashim, 2022; Jia et al., 2021).

- Most researchers typically associate UET with the CEO and TMT level of leadership. However, this study points out the extension of the UET impacts on midlevel managers as it pertains to the attributes and characteristics associated with CEOs and TMT because midlevel managers are also positioned to make decisions based on strategic choice and cognitive influence (Gross, 2019; Hambrick, 2007; Li et al., 2019). Involvement in strategic choice and cognitive influence occurs through midlevel managers' participation in shared leadership that drives innovation and performance through a communal process of developing strategy, decision-making, and setting organizational goals (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2019). Through midlevel managers' idiosyncrasies, their unique interpretation of the environment drives strategic choice and determines performance outcomes (Gordan & Li, 2021). Intellectual reasoning is not confined to the CEO and TMT level as midlevel managers possess similar experience and characteristics of strategic choice, decision-making, and how they direct the organization at their level toward successful outcomes (Hambrick, 2007). Researchers debate and consider elitist the notion that UET presumably only applies to CEOs and TMTs (Garces-Galdeano et al., 2021) as opposed to other-level leaders possessing the same character traits that enable them to make decisions effectively.

- The theory highlights that top executives' values, cognitive bases, personalities, and experiences significantly influence an organization's strategies and performance. Tenets associated with the theory are as follows:
- Top executives have impact: The actions and decisions of top leaders influence the strategic direction and performance of an organization.
- Executive characteristics influence decision-making: Top executives' traits, such as their values, personalities, and experiences, substantially impact how they make decisions based on their understanding of the events they encounter.
- Influence of demographic characteristics: Factors that reflect executives' experiences, values, and cognitive bases are age, functional background, education, tenure, and socioeconomic roots.
- Environmental factors such as industry conditions, societal norms, regulations, and more can influence executives' decisions, but the UET

primarily emphasizes how these executives interpret and respond to these conditions (Hambrick & Mason, 1984).

- Other central tenets include cognitive influence, bounded rationality, strategic choice, narcissism, reflexivity, and heterogeneity. These concepts are significant to UET as they help explain how top executives' characteristics influence strategic decision-making, strategy formulation, and ultimately the success or failure of organizations. These concepts are pivotal in understanding how top executive traits and behavior extend to midlevel managers and what drives their actions in determining an organization's strategy, decision-making, and success. The following paragraphs provide a comprehensive understanding of each of the tenets and how they drive leaders' behavior.

Cognitive Influence

- Acciarini et al. (2021) referred to UET and TMT cognition in decision-making and its link to influencing strategy, people's minds, and performance. Cristofaro et al. (2023) provided a review of 13 scholarly papers that suggested a relationship of cognition, as it is linked to emotions and decisions, to upper echelon features and personality, attitude, identity, leadership, and domains' cross-fertilization. Some of the prevailing points highlighted that (a) proactive personalities make leaders more likely to take the initiative to alter the external environment; (b) attitude related to temporal focus impacts decision-making and organizational performance; (c) identity from the perspective of experience, education, and tenure with a company influences cognition and decision-making (Jammulamadaka, 2021); (d) distributed leadership, distinctive deals, and meaningfulness of work influence employee innovative behavior; and (e) a decision maker's cognitive biases and personal values act as screens or filters when analyzing and interpreting complex situations to influence strategic decisions and organizational outcomes (Acciarini, 2021; Cristofaro et al., 2023).

- Experience, education, and networks serve as proxies for mental models, knowledge structures, and cognitive inertia in decision-making and the development of strategy and organizational change (Anwar & Bibi, 2021; Chen et al., 2023; Jammulamadaka, 2020). Cognitive factors involving bounded rationality, top management cognition, experience, skills, and knowledge affect strategic choices in decision-making (Anwar & Bibi, 2021).

Bounded Rationality

- People make decisions based on perceptions, assumptions, and expectations about future unpredictable events. Hambrick and Mason (1984) posited that these decisions or strategic choices fall within the context of bounded rationality based on the limitations of the decision maker's cognitive abilities (characteristics) and external factors, such as the environment (Barragan, 2022). The cognitive limitations refer to humans' comprehension abilities to acquire complete anticipatory information and apply it in the decision-making process and the environmental factors, which are structures and cultural norms (De Winnaarr & Scholtz, 2020). People, for the most part, make decisions based on the course of action that reaches maximization or satisfices their needs at the time versus choosing the decision that provides optimization (Barragan, 2022). Cognitive constraints prevent optimization in cases such as a restricted awareness of the alternatives that are available and an imperfect understanding of potential implications. Making decisions can result in the desired outcomes and strategic decisions or choices on objectives, means, people, and the efficient use of those resources.

Strategic Choice

- A key aspect of UET is that strategic choice at the CEO and TMT level has significant behavioral implications driven by the idiosyncrasies within their characteristic traits (Baofeng et al., 2021; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Idiosyncrasies and individual characteristic traits predict strategic choice and decision outcomes in situations with high executive job demands or the level of complexity of leaders' jobs based on their experience. Strategic decisions stem from leaders' ability to appropriately interpret and address the organization's strategic situations through how leaders collect and analyze information (Abatecola & Cristofaro, 2020; Baofeng et al., 2021).

- Based on bounded rationality, individuals are confronted with strategic choices when presented with events that are too complicated to fully understand and absorb (Pittenger et al., 2023). This sort of decision-making has a broad scope of applicability, from formal and informal decisions to decisions and indecisions, significant administrative decisions, and domain and competitive decisions involving strategy (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Strategic choice also impacts the structure and organizational performance (Kaur & Singh, 2019). Leaders' strategic choices stem not only from their characteristics and idiosyncrasies, but also from their beliefs about the organizational culture and their influence on employees (Abatecola & Cristofaro, 2020).

Narcissism

- Narcissism is a CEO and TMT character trait influencing decision-making, strategic choice, and performance outcome. Grandiosity, entitlement, domination, and superiority are characteristic traits of narcissism (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). These characteristic traits show up in leadership as a strong need for adulation, a sense of uniqueness and self-worth, entitlement, a need to exploit others for personal gain, a lack of empathy, and an obsession with dreams of power and success (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). A leader's charisma, motivation, and confidence can all benefit from a certain amount of narcissism, but narcissism can also result in overconfidence, reckless behavior, and a disregard for other people (Fatfouta, 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). The dualistic nature of narcissism can have either a positive or negative effect on employees. Fatfouta (2019) and O'Reilly and Chatman (2020) posited that the benefits of narcissism occur initially, referred to as the honeymoon period, and later, the dark side of narcissism prevails, resulting in impulsive decision-making, taking excessive risks, and negatively impacting team performance.

- Research has indicated mixed opinions about narcissism predicting leader effectiveness, with the primary thought that it is ineffective because of its link to abusive leadership and its counterproductive impact on employee engagement (Wang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). The negative aspects of narcissism can lead to a lack of trust in leaders and a reluctance to contribute to the organization's success. The various impacts of narcissism illustrate the strong influence that a leader's characteristics can have on strategic decisions and the overall health of the organization (Fatfouta, 2019; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Kim et al., 2021; O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020; Wang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023).

Reflexivity

- The UET highlights that strategic decisions and organizational performance reflect CEO and TMT experiences, values, and personalities, thus influencing their interpretation of situations and decision-making

(Hambrick & Mason, 1984). To mitigate the gap between cognition and actions, leaders use critical reflection to review their norms, actions, and decision-making to adjust to future strategic plans (Rink et al., 2022). Reflexivity enables leaders to think critically and analyze an issue objectively before making strategic decisions, allowing for increased introspection and methodical actions (Zhou et al., 2023). Reflexive leadership improves an organization's ability to negotiate external uncertainties and complexities, supporting UET's underlying tenet that executives' cognitive foundations and values influence the organization's strategic outcomes (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Leaders can create a more resilient and innovative organization that is better equipped to confront the constantly changing business environment by incorporating reflexivity into daily operations.

Heterogeneity

- Heterogeneity is the differences within the TMT, such as demographics, cognitive abilities, and psychological attributes, that can influence the long-term operation of enterprises (Wang et al., 2022). Heterogeneity shapes decision-making processes and outcomes of organizations. Through demonstration, researchers have validated that TMT members who leverage their diverse knowledge base and career experience can more thoroughly process information, improve the quality of decisions, and better support problem-solving, creativity, innovation, and change

(Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Ormiston et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Information processing refers to the TMT's access to different information sources and divergent views on problem-solving, impacting enterprise learning, reducing groupthink, and improving performance (Finkelstein et al., 2009). Organizations that leverage the diversities of heterogeneity can positively impact organizational performance and outcomes.

Upper Echelon Theory Advantages and Disadvantages

- The UET suggests that executives' backgrounds and psychological attributes affect their cognitive frames, biases, risk preferences, and strategic orientations, ultimately shaping organizational outcomes (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). However, the theory has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of UET include the following: (a) emphasizing the role of top executives in determining organizational procedures and results and acknowledging that the qualities and backgrounds of leaders can impact decision-making, resources, organizational culture, and creativity; (b) executive characteristics provide a basis for predicting the behavior and performance of organizations; and (c) organizations can identify and cultivate the skills and attributes of leaders based on UET characteristics for executive selection, succession planning, and leadership development (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The disadvantages include the following: (a) the perception that top leader characteristics are the sole basis of organizational outcomes and performance; (b) the tendency to neglect situational and contextual factors that influence executive behavior and outcomes; and (c) the lack of validating a causal relationship between leader characteristics and organizational outcome and performance (Berisha & Miftari, 2022; Garces-Galdeano et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2021).

- Although UET emphasizes leadership attributes and their influence provides valuable insights for understanding strategic decision-making, the theory has limitations, such as oversimplification, neglect of contextual factors, and challenges in establishing causality. Future research should integrate UET with other theoretical perspectives for a more in-depth understanding of organizational behavior and performance. It will also provide greater insight into leadership complexities.
- While UET is firm in its framework with a focus on CEO and TMT characteristics, its theory on the organizational outcome and the UET tenants are plausible; there is research that provides arguments for opposing views. Berisha and Miftari (2022) question the ability to objectively and reliably assess a manager's personality's psychological assumptions or constructions based on their characteristics (Gordon et al., 2021). Garces-Galdeano et al. (2021) criticizes the belief that a single character trait, such as age, can impact leaders' decision-making ability. Finkelstein (1992) suggests that while Hambrick focuses on top leader characteristics as a determinant of the organizational outcome, the power

and prestige within their enterprise influence strategy, decision-making, and outcomes. As previously mentioned, it is debatable and considered elitist that UET presumably only applies to CEOs and TMTs as opposed to other-level leaders possessing the same character traits that enable them to make decisions effectively (Garces-Galdeano et al., 2021).

Contrasting Theories

- The UET implies that the values, cognitive biases, and personalities of organizational top leaders influence their strategic direction, performance, and outcome. The leaders' experiences, perceptions, and values shape their interpretations of the situations they face, and those interpretations, in turn, shape their decisions. Several other theories in the field of organizational studies share similarities with UET in focusing on the impact of individuals, their characteristics, or the broader leadership structure on organizational outcomes. Two similar theories highlighted in this literature review are transformational leadership theory and transactional leadership theory. Alternative or opposing theories approach the same issues from different perspectives, such as the contingency theory. The contrasting perspectives and ideas offer a more profound, extensive, and accurate cognitive platform, which can inspire members to think creatively and advance novel opinions.

Transformational Theory

- The transformational leadership theory focuses on the ability of leaders to inspire and motivate their employees to exceed expected performance through their behavior and communication (Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). It emphasizes followers' needs, values, and morals and elevates those standards through transformational leadership (Hai et al., 2022; Northouse, 2021). Transformational leaders surpass the give-and-take relationship akin to transactional or traditional leadership; they seek to inspire by fostering an environment of trust, encouragement, and empowerment (Bano et al., 2023; Nabi et al., 2023). Transformational leadership includes caring about the team's needs, appreciating their accomplishments, and pushing them to capitalize on their potential (Chukwuma et al., 2023; Northouse, 2021). As a result, the leader motivates the employees to want to do well and do their part to accomplish the goals collectively.
- Transformational leaders use their vision for the organization and the effective messaging of the vision to empower employees to pursue that vision (Chukwuma et al., 2023; Hai et al., 2022). Empowerment, creating an environment that allows employees to flourish, and providing intellectual stimulation are significant factors in how transformational leaders accomplish organizational goals (Bano et al., 2023; Chukwuma et al., 2023; Northouse, 2021). Transformational leaders' trust and

confidence in their employees establishes an environment conducive to empowerment and inspires loyalty. Empowerment is particularly effective in dynamic, fast-paced, complex, and ever-changing organizations that thrive in a collaborative team environment, such as project management (Bano et al., 2023; Berraies & Chouiref, 2023; Nabi et al., 2023). Transformational leaders recognize that team cohesiveness, stakeholder relationships, and collaboration are essential for successful project outcomes. Team building is another positive influence of transformational leadership that promotes relationships, cooperation, and goal-oriented efforts.

- Transformational leadership is like UET in that it recognizes the influence of top leaders on the organization. However, it focuses more specifically on their inspirational potential and how they interact with their employees. The theory highlights the positive outcomes of the leadership style. However, it is only transformational if it transforms the follower.

Transactional Theory

- Unlike transformational leadership, transactional leadership does not focus on the individual needs of the employees; instead, leaders exchange rewards for employees' efforts (Fries & Leitterstorf, 2021). In other words, the leader-employee relationship is one where the employee's expectations for responsibilities, performance, and outcomes are explicit, and the leader expects to recognize the accomplishment of their duties and accomplishments with reward. The exchanges may vary from economic to political to psychological (Baafi et al., 2021; Shah et al.,2022). Transactional leaders also use punishment to influence efficient employee performance (Chukwuma et al., 2023; Kubai et al., 2022). The quality of the leader-employee relationship can influence the extent to which the employee will perform beyond the agreed-upon expectations (Baafi et al., 2021). Ensuring the quality of the leader-employee relationship depends significantly on employees receiving clarity on the expectations and the criteria for accomplishing the objectives (Shah et al., 2022).

- While the transactional leadership style seems to be effective, contingent upon the leader and employee upholding their agreement, research exists that contends the style is threatening and intimidating to some who are not as responsive to change, struggle with cognitive abilities, or it is not consistent with their values and beliefs (Atasoy, 2020; Islam et al., 2021). Scholars also suggest that due to leaders needing to be made aware of employees' performance, there needs to be accountability or reinforcement of employee expectations (Hodson, 2021; Jowah, 2020; Malodia et al., 2022). Chukwuma et al. (2023) suggest that the leader's behavior could foster a stressful environment due to the employees' fear and lack of trust.
- While the transformational theory and transactional theory, and the UET focus on managerial or leadership qualities and how they affect

organizational outcomes, each has a distinct area of concentration based on different underlying assumptions.

Contingency Theory

- The contingency theory argues that the effectiveness of managerial decisions and practices depends on the fit or alignment with the characteristics of the organizational environment and the situation (Ali et al., 2023; Fiedler, 1958; Júnior & Pereira, 2023; McAdam et al., 2019). The characteristics are also called contingency factors which include strategy, technology, uncertainty, size, and nature of the task that drive the influences of the environment and the insertion and adaptation of the organization (Fiedler, 1958; Hunt & Fedynich, 2019; Júnior & Pereira, 2023). Therefore, no standard strategy or structure drives the decision-making or strategy formulation process; it is contingent on the structure, processes, and organizational environment. Organizations can adapt to the changing external environment based on contingency variables; thus, improving the fit or alignment will improve performance (Fiedler, 1958; Hunt & Fedynich, 2019; Júnior & Pereira, 2023). Management is responsible for examining the fit between the strategy and business model to identify the variables that may deter achieving organizational goals (Shonhadji & Maulidi, 2022).
- Both the contingency theory and UET acknowledge that external environments influence organizations, but contingency theory pays less

attention to the role of individual executives. These theories offer supplementary insights into comprehending organizational actions and outcomes and are not mutually exclusive. Researchers frequently consider the research question, the context, and the depth of analysis while choosing a particular theoretical approach.

Midlevel Manager Levels and Responsibilities

- Midlevel managers are pivotal in an organization as they are the backbone, bridging the gap between strategic vision and operational execution, senior leadership, and lower-level managers or frontline staff (Fannon et al., 2021). There are various levels within an organization's hierarchy where a midlevel manager resides, from positions as department heads, regional managers, division deputies, branch managers, branch chiefs, branch leads, and supervisors. Depending on size, an organization may have many levels of midlevel managers. For example, within a Headquarters, Department of the Army directorate is a director, deputy director, division chiefs, deputy division chiefs, and branch chiefs or team leads. Within this hierarchy example, two deputies and an untold number of branch chiefs or team leads serve as midlevel managers. While the scope of responsibility is broader the higher up the hierarchy, they fit within the definition of a midlevel manager. In a hierarchical structure, midlevel managers receive, absorb, and interpret strategies and translate them into actionable tasks for their direct reports (Otocki et al., 2020). This concept of hierarchy and midlevel managers apply to military and civilian organizations.

- An inextricable link between midlevel managers and their senior leadership prompts their behavior to mimic their leader's, mainly if it is a good relationship (Sadaghiani, 2023). The impact has a trickling-down effect, translating to the relationship between midlevel managers and their direct reports (Sadaghiani, 2023). Similarly, if the relationship between the senior leader and the midlevel manager is unfavorable, there could be a negative trickle-down effect with their direct reports. A good senior leader and midlevel manager relationship is essential to achieve goals efficiently and effectively. The optimum relationship is one in which there is an alignment and synchronization of the thought processes, culture, and outlook on how the organization should operate. This type of relationship includes mutual trust, confidence, and the senior leader empowering the midlevel manager based on in-depth knowledge of the organization, experience, and scope of influence on stakeholders at all levels.
- Establishing, fostering, and maintaining a good working relationship between the senior leader and midlevel manager requires effective communication. Leaders cannot underestimate the importance of communication throughout the organization but more so between the senior leader and midlevel manager as they set the tone for the organization. Communication is a fundamental and pervasive process that

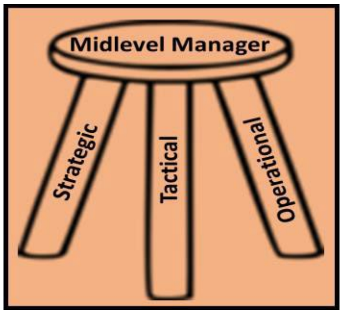
impacts every aspect of an organization and can positively or negatively impact innovation, change, productivity, and accomplishment of goals (Sadaric & Skerlavaj, 2023; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021). However, some leaders do not understand why communication is essential in an organization because they view communication as simply human nature. It is the art of tailoring communication to align with a particular action, multidirectional communication, or perceptions from communication interaction (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). Open, honest, and transparent communication inspires trust, commitment, engagement, and retention. The need for this type of communication and the associated benefits applies to the frontline level of the organization and at every level, including between senior leaders and midlevel managers.

- Midlevel managers navigate the intricacies of their commitment to senior leadership while balancing the competing demands of stakeholders, lateral managers, and subordinate staff. They must also navigate management at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels. These levels align with the hierarchical structure within the organization. Midlevel managers also navigate these levels simultaneously, which is challenging as they often struggle with competing requirements, tasks, projects, interests, and human capital (Sadaghiani, 2023). They can find themselves in a precarious position having to navigate and negotiate expectation management of the multiple tasks across the broader organizational structure and stakeholders.

- The multifaceted roles of midlevel managers include selling ideas to top management for innovation or change management while motivating subordinates to accept change for implementation (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Sadaghiani, 2023). Midlevel managers' responsibilities reside in three functional areas, as illustrated by the three-legged stool concept in Figure 1. The three-legged stool concept emphasizes the three pillars that underlie the environment of midlevel managers' distinct roles and responsibilities. Each leg must function efficiently and effectively to achieve overall mission success and maintain stability. The three pillars are the responsibilities incorporated within the environment at the strategy, tactical, and operational levels. The strength of the stool depends on the stability of the legs; the less stable the legs, the more significant the influence of the barriers (Samosh, 2021). If the strategy is weak or unclear, it can create instability at the tactical level to accomplish goals. If there are problems at the operational level specific to human capital management, it may impact personnel accomplishing their mission at the tactical level.

Figure 1

The Midlevel Manager Three-Legged Stool



Note. Figure 1 depicts the three levels at which midlevel managers carry out their responsibilities.

Strategic Level

- Midlevel managers can play a vital role within the environment of the first foundation of the stool, the strategic level. The positive relationship predicated on strategic two-way communication sets an environment conducive to leader sharing and developing strategy versus only receiving, conveying, and implementing (Spivey, 2020). Shared leadership can drive innovation and performance through a communal process of developing strategy, decision-making, and setting organizational goals (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2019). Effective strategy development and implementation depend on the interaction between senior leaders or TMT and midlevel managers, which could improve the quality of strategic decisions and implementation (Talha et al., 2020). This type of collaboration between senior leaders and midlevel managers allows midlevel managers to influence strategy formulation and its effectiveness by providing comprehensive, synthesized, and clarifying information to serve as a basis for senior leader decision-making (Iqbal et al., 2022).

- Midlevel managers have morphed into the new model of midlevel managers characterized by a more strategic focus, a more enriched role aligned with leaders, innovators, and risk takers, and empowered as a change agent (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). Midlevel managers are instrumental in formulating strategy and change management by leveraging in-depth knowledge and understanding of internal operations, workforce, stakeholder interest, and industry (Badri et al., 2022; Sadaghiani, 2023). Involving the midlevel manager in strategy development reflects a team approach. Although research exists that questions if midlevel manager positions are necessary for the organizational structure, citing their ambiguous role (Iqbal et al., 2022), this study identifies the importance of their role in the organization. Bryant and Stensaker (2011) posited that the multiple roles of midlevel managers present a dilemma with potentially unfair expectations.
- Midlevel managers are the custodians of tacit knowledge, the subjective, informal, and specific knowledge gained through an individual's unique experience (Abugre & Adebola, 2015; Mintzberg, 1994). They have an in-depth level of tacit knowledge about their organization's operation due to their pivotal role in the strategic, tactical, and operational responsibilities.

Leadership is an example of tacit knowledge. The skills associated with leadership, such as communication, active listening, and emotional intelligence, develop with exposure, training, and experience. This type of knowledge is essential for formulating strategy and strategic decision-making (Mintzberg, 1994). Midlevel managers communicate tacit knowledge indirectly through action, experience, and practice. While tacit knowledge makes the midlevel manager critical to the organization's success, it also presents a knowledge management challenge upon their departure, as tacit knowledge is not easily transferable to other individuals.

Tactical Level

- The second foundation of the stool, the tactical level, serves as the vital link between the midlevel manager’s role within an organization's strategic vision and operational execution. At this level, midlevel managers translate strategic goals into actionable plans and initiatives (Iqbal et al., 2022). Midlevel managers develop strategies at the tactical level that include relaying a comprehensive understanding of the task, context, instructions, assignment of duties, required resources, and setting a task completion date (Schermerhorn & Bachrack, 2023). Midlevel managers can direct operations at this level because they understand the organization's overarching vision. Midlevel managers also have a responsibility for coordination at this level.

- Coordination is essential to navigating the competing requirements that often coincide and to ensure the synchronization and synergy of the many moving parts of the myriad tasks for deconfliction and the successful accomplishment of all efforts. The coordination includes vertical and horizontal communication and enabling feedback to ensure accurate messaging with internal and external stakeholders. Effective communication is vital to ensure buy-in on new ideas and employee engagement.
- Controlling is another essential responsibility of midlevel managers for reviewing, monitoring, and measuring task requirements to ensure employees meet their targets (Schermerhorn & Bachrack, 2023). Midlevel managers are essential in adapting tactical plans to changing circumstances. They possess the necessary knowledge and situational awareness to make timely adjustments, ensuring operational activities remain aligned with organizational objectives in dynamic environments. Coordination and controlling require the midlevel manager to supervise the organization's day-to-day operations while balancing requirements from various levels within the organization's hierarchy.

Operational Level

- The third foundation of the stool is the operational level. Human capital is the most essential asset in an organization (Rasool et al., 2019). In the operational environment, midlevel managers focus on human capital and those efforts required to support their employees, such as resource allocation, performance management, communication, professional development, continuous process improvement, and employee engagement. Influencing behavior and performance through performance management is essential to accomplishing organizational goals (Lewandowski & Cirella, 2023). The areas mentioned above and more associated with employee care fall under human resource management.

- The midlevel manager is responsible for ensuring resource allocation that includes people, funding, time, space, materials, and equipment are available to positively impact productivity and task accomplishment. Performance management focuses on translating goals into results and assessing if employees are doing what is expected of them (Rasool et al., 2019). Communication is the midlevel manager's most effective tool if used properly. Achieving success in the multifaceted roles of midlevel managers hinge on effective multidirectional communication (Sadaric, 2023; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021). Staff development is essential to individual broadening, productivity, process enhancement, and keeping pace with global changes within modern organizations (Rasool et al., 2019).
- As change agents, midlevel managers continually seek ways and opportunities to improve processes, enhance efficiency and effectiveness, and innovate (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Badri et al., 2022; Fannon et al.,

2022). However, some research questions the extent of influence midlevel managers have on organizational performance and the mechanism by which their capabilities are transformative (Badri et al., 2022). Success at the operational level lays the foundation for the organization's overall strategic success. It fosters a productive work environment and ensures that daily operations support the objectives of the business while fostering efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability.

- Although there are opposing thoughts on the importance of the role of midlevel managers and their transformative capabilities (Badri et al., 2022), research has validated the successful execution of the strategic, tactical, and operational level responsibilities of midlevel managers as being critical to the success of the organization.

Midlevel Manager Transition

- According to a 2021 Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) Survey, the turnover rate of corporate leaders increased from 14% to 18% during the COVID-19 pandemic (Segal, 2021) and may continue to rise. Wang and Sun (2021) consider leader turnover as one of the most significant events in the lifecycle of an organization because of the new leader's influence to change the strategic direction, decisions, and overall performance of the organization (Kim et al., 2021; Wang & Sun, 2022). Leader turnover creates gaps that may have varying degrees of impact. Gaps from the position being unencumbered, through the transition of the new leader

(Lokke & Sorensen, 2021), and throughout the leader's tenure based on behavior can impact operations, business strategy, performance, and innovation (Kim et al., 2021). Wang and Sun (2021) suggest that low-performing organizations benefit from transition while high-performing organizations encounter negative impacts. Leader transitions would be an opportunity for growth and development within an organization or tumultuous, causing disruptions that negatively impact the organization.

- There is a connection between new leaders transitioning into an organization and the UET principles. The dynamics between individual leadership styles, cognitive frames, and organizational structure provide insights into how leadership transitions can shape the future of organizations. The transition highlights the potential for transformation and changes from a new leader's perspectives and decision-making styles. Hambrick and Mason (1984) posited that UET provides a framework that underpins the phenomenon that associates top executives' characteristics with the strategies and performance of an organization. The UET highlights that an organization's outcomes reflect its top managers' cognitive base and values (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 2007; Sozen, 2022). It assumes that a leader's experiences, personality, values, and cognitive style shape their perceptions and interpretations of strategic issues, consequently affecting organizational outcomes (Baofeng et al., 2021). Therefore, the transition of a new leader introduces a novel set of cognitive schemas that can drastically influence the organization's strategic direction and operational methods (Baofeng et al., 2021; Gross, 2019).

- According to UET, new leaders transitioning into an organization may drive strategic direction changes, policies, and procedures based on preconceived notions of success based on their experience, education, beliefs, and characteristic traits (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Their individualistic cognitive and behavioral traits, as suggested by UET, can permeate organizational strategies and actions. Although research reference CEOs and the TMT at the top of the hierarchical structure and as a top decision-maker (Wang & Sun, 2022), midlevel managers hold the same position within their hierarchical level of the organization with the authority to participate in strategy formulation (Spivey, 2020), decision-making, and implement decisions. Like CEO and TMT, midlevel managers' strategies and decision-making can also stem from the premise that experiences, personality, values, and cognitive style shape their perceptions and interpretations of strategic issues. These characteristic traits can influence organizational performance and outcome.
- With human capital being an organization's primary driver of knowledge, skills, and expertise, a new midlevel manager's transition can threaten its survivability, sustainability, and profitability (Kim et al., 2020). The need to achieve a competitive advantage equal to or greater than their

predecessor, influence their performance evaluation, and expand their scope and skill set for continued progression may drive new midlevel managers' behavior. Top-down directed changes driven by new midlevel managers can have a disruptive impact (Wang & Sun, 2022) on the entire organization, its power structure (Sun et al., 2020), and stakeholder relationships. Such turbulence stemming from transition can create instability and negatively impact performance (Lokke & Sorensen, 2021), employee engagement, organizational culture (Kim et al., 2020), and long-term sustainability.

- When midlevel management influences are not positive, they can manifest themselves into specific employee perspectives or behavior contrary to the attributes that underpin the success of an organization. Organizations must understand attributes that can negatively influence employees' behavior, perspective, and well-being. It is also essential for organizations to understand employee perceptions and the consequences of the negative influence that can impact productivity, reputation, cause turnover intention, and threaten successful operations (Wang & Sun, 2022). Conversely, when midlevel manager transitions are positive, the impacts can result in increased morale, communication, performance, innovation, and creativity.
- An organization's and its employees' reaction to a midlevel manager transition can be profound, with the repercussions primarily relying on

how well s/he performs. With the multifaceted roles of midlevel managers and the pervasiveness of such a pivotal position across the organization, senior leadership must carefully manage the transition of new midlevel managers and ensure they possess the requisite competencies and skills for the success and growth of the organization.

Midlevel Manager Competencies and Skills

- As the backbone of the organization responsible for bridging the gap between strategic vision and operational execution, senior leadership, and lower-level managers or frontline staff, midlevel managers require specific competencies to be successful. This section focuses on midlevel managers' competencies and skills. Kipper et al. (2021) defines competencies as the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors that enable handling complicated demands, including interpersonal traits, ethical ideals, and skills as an individual's capacity to execute tasks and resolve problems. Skills make up the competencies. There needs to be more clarity in the distinction between competencies and skills. Some research views the terms as interchangeable. Competencies and skills are necessary to successfully navigate the multifaceted roles of midlevel managers as organizations continue to grow globally, explore technological advances, integrate diversity and multiculturalism, and expand into corporate social responsibility.

- Many midlevel managers have educational backgrounds and have received training to build leadership, technical, and interpersonal skills. According to UET, some new leaders transition into an organization to drive change in strategic directions, policies, and procedures based on preconceived notions of what constitutes success based on their experience, education, beliefs, and characteristic traits (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This approach works for some people, but for others, their leadership style needs to align with the organization's culture and goals. Due to the multifaceted roles of midlevel managers, many competencies are aligned with the roles specific to the strategic, tactical, and operational levels, as illustrated in Figure 1. Although Alvarenga et al. (2020) contended that different roles require different competencies, this study identifies the top five pervasive core competencies across all midlevel manager levels are leadership, communication, strategic thinking, problem-solving, and human capital management. The core competencies are essential for organizational success (Alvarenga et al., 2020). Identifying requisite competencies and skills (Figure 2) for midlevel managers is fundamental to establishing leader development strategies. It offers a benchmark against which leadership can assess midlevel managers and enables leadership to develop or procure training programs to address those areas.

Figure 2

Midlevel Manager Competencies and Skills Aligned to Strategic, Tactical, and Operational Level

	COMPETENCIES				
	Leadership	Communication	Strategic Thinking	Problem-Solving	Human Capital Management
SKILLS	decision-making	verbal	vision	creative thinking	leadership
	critical thinking	nonverbal	creativity	decision-making	active listening
	innovation	written	systematic thinking	analysis	technical
	team-building	conciseness	planning	teamwork	ethical
	communication	active listening	decision-making	collaboration	communication
	empathy	clarity	adaptability	corroboration	decision-making
	problem-solving	confidence	information-gathering	communication	empathy
	conflict management	empathy	analytical	resilience	interpersonal
	change management	respect	communication	adaptability	inspiring
	interpersonal	responsiveness	organizational knowledge	initiative	supportive
	emotional intelligence	transparency	knowledge management	challenge	motivation
	self-confidence	observance	innovation	inductive reasoning	team builder
	determination	oganization	insight	technology	empowerment
	integrity	social	foresight	visualization	coaching
	sociability	creativity	inquisitive mind	association	problem-solving
	inclusiveness	interpersonal	flexibility	comprehension	humility
	people management	adaptability	adaptability	manipulation	authenticiity
	agility	feedback	inference	reasoning	diversity
	adaptability	visual	observation	synthesis	equity
	motivation	conflict management	collaboration	judgement	strategic
	negotiation	cohesion	challenge	organization	accountable
	flexibility	open-Mindedness	align	evaluation	forward-thinking
	organization	tone	interpret	research	analytical

Note. This figure illustrates requisite competencies and skills of midlevel managers. Supervisors or midlevel managers can assess these areas in identifying development needs.

Leadership

- Leadership competency is individual-based knowledge, skills, and abilities to shape an effective leader for organizational success. Leadership competencies are essential for inspiring and motivating internal and external stakeholders, establishing and maintaining sustainable organizational success, decision-making, and navigating and driving change (Citaku & Ramadani, 2020). Some may think leadership is a born trait. Conversely, leading multiple people, navigating in a diverse and multicultural environment, in multiple conditions, and multilevel environments in a congruent manner supports the requirement to build competencies (skills) (Spivey, 2020). The context and situation influence the skills required for leadership, as employing skills in response to one situation may have positive results but different results in a different situation (Northouse, 2021). There are numerous skills associated with leadership competency, and they are practical requisite skills in the role of midlevel manager.

Communication

- Communication is a fundamental and pervasive process that impacts every aspect of an organization and can positively or negatively impact innovation, change, productivity, and accomplishment of goals (Sadaric, 2023; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021). Establishing, fostering, and maintaining a good working relationship between the senior leader, midlevel managers, and stakeholders requires effective communication. Leaders cannot underestimate the importance of communication throughout the organization but more so between the senior leader and midlevel manager as they set the tone for the organization. Effective communication can benefit the organization by improving productivity, increasing morale, inspiring trust, improving employee engagement, and strengthening teamwork. Communication has many facets beyond human interaction, such as tailored communication to align with a particular action, multidirectional communication that enables feedback, transparent communication that concisely conveys a message, and communication that shapes perceptions (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019).

Strategic Thinking

- Strategic thinking is a dynamic process that continuously develop through interaction with the environment and includes diverse and pragmatic thinking (Ershadi & Eskandari Dehdazzi, 2019). Strategic thinking involves seeing the big picture, planning, and implementing action. This thought process leads to formulating strategies, inspiring innovation, and solving problems, all of which help to maintain a competitive advantage. Insight is an essential aspect of strategic thinking as the concept requires a review of the past, present, and future as a bridge to strategy and to drive the organization to the future (Ershadi & Eskandari Dehdazzi, 2019).

Problem-Solving

- Leadership is a multifaceted construct encompassing various roles, responsibilities, and skills. Among these, problem-solving is one of the most vital competencies leaders need to possess. Leaders must efficiently address complex challenges given the complexity of the modern world as defined by rapid technical breakthroughs, global market dynamics, and a diverse workforce**.** Problem-solving seeks to close gaps between reality and desired outcomes (Rahman, 2019). Individuals have varying approaches to problem-solving. However, the most common is using appropriate technology, tools, analysis, decision-making techniques, and a solution-supporting process (He, 2015).

- Bardach and Patashnik (2019) and Rahman (2019) highlight an eight-step approach to problem-solving that includes (1) defining the problem, (2) evidence collection, (3) developing courses of action, (4) determining the criteria, (5) project the outcomes, (6) identify tradeoffs, (7) deciding on a course of action, and (8) present the decision. Midlevel managers play a pivotal role in organizational problem-solving, as problems can occur in every aspect of operations, from processes, resources, people, and more (Sengupta et al., 2020).

Human Capital Management

- Employees are arguably an organization's most valuable and intangible asset, as they are integral to maintaining an organization's competitive advantage and are significant to its success (Mangi, 2009; Paliga et al., 2022). Human capital comprises expertise, capabilities, knowledge, abilities, creativity, job properties, intellectual intelligence, and employee savviness (Gruzina et al., 2021). Human capital management (HCM) entails managing people as assets and emphasizing their growth and use to meet strategic organizational goals. Employees look to midlevel managers to catalyze successful operations by providing direction, guidance, recognition, professional development, fairness, respect, and as an example in the organization.

- Midlevel management of HCM is significant in organizations as it drives engagement, effectiveness, productivity, and performance (Mangi, 2009). When leadership influences are not positive, they can manifest themselves in employee perspectives or behavior contrary to the attributes that underpin the success of an organization (Abalkhail, 2022). The organizational performance and employee effectiveness level can determine if the midlevel manager will spend much of his day on HCM or sustaining effective operations. Either way, there is no getting around HCM responsibilities in an organization. Taking care of personnel in an organization equitably and respectfully contributes to employment engagement, job satisfaction, increased job performance, and retention.
- Based on the UET premise that leaders (including midlevel managers) lead based on their experiences and characteristics, leaders sometimes transition into an organization with preconceived mindsets about how they treat people and what has worked in the past (Sozen et al., 2022). However, leaders use a situational approach to HCM based on the organizational culture, climate, employee mindset, leadership perceptions, and more. There is no one-size-fits-all in determining an approach for managing people. Effective midlevel managers should know enough about the organization to identify the most effective strategy and approach to managing their team. The skills depicted in Figure 2 cover the lifecycle of employees in an organization.

- Midlevel managers are crucial in translating the organization's strategy into action, managing teams, and ensuring smooth operations. The competencies outlined in this section - leadership, communication, strategic thinking, problem-solving, and human capital management - are fundamental to their role. Therefore, organizations must recognize the importance of these competencies and the numerous cross-level requisite skills in most cases and prioritize their development to drive organizational success.

Midlevel Manager Development

- Midlevel managers are the crucial link in any organization, seamlessly connecting the top-level management and direct report employees and bridging the gap between strategic leadership and tactical execution (Fannon et al., 2021). The multifaceted roles of midlevel managers and the functional responsibilities at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels include five competencies (leadership, communication, strategic thinking, problem-solving, and human capital management) and various skills (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Garces-Galdeano et al., 2021; Hambrick, 2007; Singh et al., 2019). Although many midlevel managers have education, have received training, and can draw from their experience, some may need more specific leadership skills tailored to enhance their personal development and to increase an organization's efficiency and effectiveness.

- McDermott et al. (2011) posited that leaders' personal growth processes receive little explicit attention, even though crucial developmental experiences like crises, failures, and successes can produce lessons that lead to new perspectives, skills, or a change in character. McDermott et al. (2011) offered a difference between leader and leadership development as leader development focuses on human capital, an individual model of leadership, an intrapersonal competence base, and an underpinning by core personal skills that include self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, and shift towards "relational dialogue," rather than a traditional emphasis on personal power.
- Kjellstrom (2020) defines leadership development as enhancing a person's skills, abilities, and confidence to be effective in a leadership role. According to the Army, leader development is the intentional, ongoing, sequential, and progressive process, based on Army values, that develops soldiers and Army civilians into competent, assured leaders capable of taking decisive action (U.S. Army, AR 350-1, 2017). The Army considers development a worthy investment to maintain the Army as a profession and is a crucial source of combat power (U.S. Army ADP 6-22, 2019). Wu and Crocco (2019) distinguish between leader and leadership development, with leader development directly related to an individual's development, while leadership development entails a process that focuses on more than one individual. For this study, leader and leadership

development apply to midlevel managers. Fortune 500 executives rank leadership development within the top three human capital priorities and one of their top concerns (Ayoobzadeh & Boies, 2020). There are common themes across the different definitions, with the prevailing theme being the importance of leader development and the positive impact on the organization.

- Organizational leaders who have experienced the outcome of midlevel manager development are aware of its value based on measurable impacts on an organization's efficiency, productivity, and competitive advantage. Conversely, some opinions question the positive impact of leader development in organizations. The worth of the funding organizations invests based on observations of leadership development programs overlook context and provide a one-size-fits-all manner, focusing solely on changing behavior versus addressing underlying mindset; and development is leader-centric and ignoring followers that may share leadership (Kjellström et al., 2020; McCauley & Palus, 2021).
- Organizations employ various means to nurture midlevel managers through development. There is no one-size-fits-all, as the type and extent of skills development may vary from one leader to another. Other factors in determining the type of development are time, money, and leadership support. Regardless of the method used to improve an individual's knowledge, abilities, and skills, the organization will only benefit if the

person can use that knowledge or skills to change their behavior in a way consistent with the organization's mission and goals (Allen & Hartman, 2008). To ensure the development of the right skills, the supervisor should assess the midlevel manager's skills through observation or a formal written assessment to identify needs and shortcomings that the individual and organization can benefit from development (Ayoobzadeh & Boies, 2020). Through self-assessment, midlevel managers can assess their strengths and weaknesses based on specific parameters to judge areas for enhancement. With the various types of leader development, midlevel managers can employ a single development approach, such as formal training, or mix and match different development approaches. For example, a midlevel manager can employ a formal development approach and mentorship.

- This study provides a portfolio of options for development approaches for midlevel managers. The various methods of midlevel manager development exist due to the diverse needs and challenges these individuals face and the unique organizational cultures for which they work. Midlevel managers require various skills to navigate their multifaceted roles and responsibilities. Since one size does not fit all, development should target those skills identified as lacking, skills aligned with the corresponding leadership styles, skills aligned with the organizational contextual factors, skills to support individual development needs, and skills to support a dynamic and modern enterprise. The development portfolio for midlevel managers includes Formal, Experiential, Exposure, and Soft Skill training.

Formal Development

- Formal development is associated with institutionally sponsored or highly structured training that may take place in courses, classrooms, and schools (Caldana et al., 2023). This type of training may result in attendees receiving grades, degrees, diplomas, and certificates. Attendees participate with the expectation to learn. This type of training environment enables the development of sustainable competencies and skills. The training can include extensive curriculums with lengthy periods to complete or curriculums accomplished in a day or two.
- An example is the U.S. Office of Personnel Management-sponsored Federal Executive Institute (FEI). It includes a 30-day course offered to senior leaders, including midlevel managers, with the successful completion codified in a certificate of completion. It offers various courses such as Leadership for a Democratic Society that focuses on enduring development for improved self-awareness, leadership and management skills, interorganizational collaboration and problem-solving, employee engagement, and a broadened understanding of the U.S. Constitution (U.S. OPM, n.d.). Other formal or institutional training examples include the Army's Senior Service College, continuing education, and more.

Experiential Development

- Development through experiential training is a less formal approach to learning that occurs outside the formal learning environment and focuses on leveraging experience and engagement on the job and with people to learn (Becker & Bish, 2017). However, a less formal approach does not imply less effectiveness or benefit. The learning provides practical knowledge that can enhance individual development by enhancing intra- and inter-personal skills, cultural awareness, and skills supportive of a dynamic environment that requires adaptability and flexibility (Becker & Bish, 2017). Experiential learning includes learning from others, learning from tasks, and learning with others. Executive coaching, mentoring, critical reflection, and 360-degree feedback are forms of development gained through learning from others.
- **Executive Coaching**. Executive coaching is a learning approach that creates self-awareness, helps drive transformational change, provides critical challenge and support, and develops leadership within an organizational context (Pillay & April, 2022). This type of learning is a needed development approach to address the growing expectation of leader performance, the dynamic and changing environment of organizations that require peak performance, consequences of poor and ineffective leadership, and to address weaknesses identified through self-assessment (Longenecker & McCartney, 2020). Some benefits of

executive coaching include focusing on performance outcomes, cultivating leader maturity, aligning behavior critical to the leadership position, holding the leader accountable to motivate engagement, enhancing interpersonal skills for effective communication, impacting better team building and team cohesiveness, enhancing critical thinking for decision-making and strategy formulation, receiving objective and candid feedback to help shape behavior, motivating and having a sounding-board, and for self-reflection (Longenecker & McCartney, 2020; Pillay & April, 2022).

- Critics of executive coaching questions the suitability and receptiveness of the coached leader, the inability to accurately measure effectiveness, and the lack of industry standardization and governance (Bono et al., 2009). Executive coaching is a valuable tool in leadership development, benefiting individuals and organizations. Despite some criticisms, its significance is in today's rapidly evolving business environment.
- **Mentoring**. Mentoring is essential to an organization's midlevel managers' personal and professional growth. Cook (2022) reports that 84% of Fortune 500 companies in the United States have mentorship programs. Mentoring typically involves a one-on-one relationship between a senior, more experienced person (the mentor) and a junior, less skilled person (the mentee) to foster self-improvement and professional growth through serving as a role model, sharing experiences, and providing advice and guidance (Deng & Turner, 2023; Gisbert-Trejo et al., 2019; Yin, 2023).

Mentorship can occur between the mentor and mentee from different organizations (inter-organizational) or within the same organization (intra-organizational) (Eby, 1997; Gisbert-Trejo et al., 2019).

- Eby (1997) and Gisbert-Trejo et al. (2019) expound on inter-organizational mentorship as enabling diverse insights and exposure to a broader context of knowledge, while intra-organizational mentorship involves the same sharing of insight and exposure to knowledge but from within the context for which they are both familiar. Both types of mentorships help midlevel managers navigate through enhancing their skills, advising on career paths for advancement, sharing tacit knowledge, and enhancing emotional intelligence. Mutual trust is an essential component of a mentoring relationship. While mentorship is an effective form of leader development, it has criticisms for lack of standardization, time and resource-dependent, limitations due to bias, questionable positive impact on development (Boak & Crabbe, 2019), and the potential for success predicated on the quality of the relationship (Deng & Turner, 2023). Besides standardization, addressing the other stated limitation can optimize the relationship to attain the fullest benefits of mentorship.
- **Critical Reflection**. Critical reflection is a vital leader development approach for midlevel managers responsible for a broad range of responsibilities and in a position pivotal to bridging the gap between senior leadership and direct reports while also balancing the relationship

of key stakeholders. Critical reflection enables transformative learning by enabling leaders to question assumptions, beliefs, and values to understand their experiences better (Wu & Crocco, 2019). Critical reflection goes beyond simply remembering experiences for leader development as it is a more probing exploration into one's metaphysical (beyond physics and scientific experiments) assumptions about the nature of reality (Brookfield,1995). In other words, it entails deeply reflecting within the context of leadership, focusing on power dynamics that enable leaders to address uncertain and complex circumstances. This type of introspection can result in new approaches to issues, creative to systemic thinking, increased understanding to change behavior, self-awareness, improved decision-making, and team effectiveness (Brookfield, 1995; Wu & Crocco, 2019). Wu and Crocco (2019) noted that the broad conceptualization of reflection can provide varied outcomes that could reveal a need for more agreement. Although there is noted criticism, reflection can provide transformative benefits for individuals and an organization.

- **360-Degree Feedback.** 360-degree feedback is a tool for leader development to foster self-awareness, growth, and organization improvement by collecting information on an individual's behavior and influence (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). This survey tool employs feedback from the leader's staff, peers, supervisor, and the individual to provide comprehensive insight into the individual's actions and behaviors and how they affect the entire team (Drew, 2009). Based on the adage, what one gets out of the assessment will only be as good as the responses to the questions. In other words, if the feedback is honest and objective, evaluated leaders can use it to enhance their strengths and improve weaknesses. Leaders can use the information derived from the 360-degree feedback to establish developmental plans and goals aligned with the needs of the evaluated leader.

- Reflection is an essential element of the tool as it requires reflection of past behaviors, habits, and actions to determine possible trends and specific areas requiring adjustment. Internal self-awareness (self-assessment) and external self-awareness (others assess) are essential to the leader development process because individuals must understand their impact on others (Barry & McManigle, 2021). The successful and effective outcome of 360-degree feedback is contingent on the organizational leader's top-down recognition and support (modeling), importance, and improvements (Drew, 2009).
- While this type of leader development is a good tool for self-awareness, it lacks total anonymity, leading to survey takers using caution in stating opinions that the evaluated leader can misinterpret and respond defensively or the feedback is vague, which is a safe approach. There must be an environment conducive to honest feedback. By embracing a culture

of feedback, leaders and organizations can drive growth and positive change.

Soft Skills Development

- Soft skills development is an approach that focuses on skills aligned to interpersonal relationships, personality traits, and individual qualities (Lemos & Brunstein, 2023). It targets a broad range of leader competencies for development, such as the top five identified in this study for midlevel managers. Even broader are the associated skills fundamental in navigating the multifaceted roles and responsibilities required within the organization's strategic, tactical, and operational levels. Soft skills are particularly popular with more technological and competitive organizations that seek skills that will foster social interaction to enhance teamwork, communication, leadership, and decision-making (Lemos & Brunstein, 2023; Soft Skills, 2023). Leaders with only technical skills and business knowledge will no longer suffice as they need to address the relational skills required to foster a harmonious work environment.
- Critical reflection plays a role in soft skills development, focusing on self-perception, questioning assumptions, and reflecting on exchanging new ideas (Lemos & Brunstein, 2023; Soft Skills, 2023). Some examples of soft skills development are communication, engagement, teamwork, networking, professionalism, problem-solving, dealing with stress, work-life balance, and more. Soft skills development provides individual

benefits for leadership enhancement, and the organization benefits by fostering a positive culture, improving communication and collaboration, and improving productivity and performance.

- Midlevel manager development is critical in enhancing individual and organizational success. They are the nexus between senior leadership and direct reports. Tailoring development programs to address midlevel managers' unique strengths and weaknesses fosters personal growth, increases competency, and cultivates leadership skills vital to managing complex and dynamic organizations. Midlevel manager development offered through a formal, experiential, and soft skills approach directly contributes to organizational improvements and sustainability through better decision-making, increased engagement, and the effective alignment of individual goals with broader organizational objectives.

Summary of the Professional and Academic Literature

- The qualitative pragmatic study explored effective strategies senior leaders use to develop midlevel managers to sustain successful operations when transitioning into an organization. The purpose of the literature review was to comprehensively assess the research topic by synthesizing relevant professional and academic literature to produce insights and valuable information for the reader. The UET provided the framework that underpins the study, which posited that a firm's strategic choices and performance are reflections of its top executives and significantly impact how midlevel managers transition into an organization (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The research included extending the applications of the UET that focuses on the characteristics and UET tenets of CEO and TMT to midlevel managers in their multifaceted roles at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels within the organization and their role in strategy formulation and decision-making (Anzengruber et al., 2017; Garces-Galdeano et al., 2021; Hambrick, 2007; Singh et al., 2019). Midlevel managers also serve as the crucial bridge in an organization, linking the upper echelons' strategic perspectives to the operational teams' execution-driven focus and ensuring the success of day-to-day operations (Otocki et al., 2020).

- This study contended that despite not being the ultimate decision-makers, top management's values, experiences, and characteristics influence midlevel managers' decision-making and behavior consciously or subconsciously (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hashim, 2022; Jia et al., 2021). The UET tenets, such as cognitive influence, bounded rationality, strategic choice, narcissism, reflexivity, and heterogeneity, provide a comprehensive understanding of how top executives make decisions, formulate strategy, and how the tenets influence their behavior (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Midlevel managers transitioning into an organization with the mindset characterized by the UET tenets can positively or negatively impact sustaining or establishing successful organizational performance. Therefore, it is incumbent on senior leaders to assess shortcomings and gaps in the competencies and skills of midlevel managers to provide leader development consistent with the organization's culture and objectives (Ayoobzadeh & Boies, 2020). This study focused on leader development to benefit the leader and organization.

Transition

- Section 1 focused on the foundation of the study by providing a comprehensive understanding of the background of the problem of turnover of midlevel managers and the successful transitioning of new midlevel managers into an organization with little to no disruption. The background led to the specific problem of some senior leaders lack strategies for transitioning new subordinate leaders into the organization to maintain the continuity of operations. The study aimed to explore strategies used by senior leaders to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of operations. The UET provided the conceptual framework for the study, which focused on the characteristics of senior leaders predicting performance outcomes. The study extended those UET characteristics to midlevel managers.
- The research question is: What effective strategies do senior leaders use to develop midlevel managers during their transition into an organization to sustain operations? The significance and practical application of the study provide dynamic organizations that experience turnover and transition

with strategies to help develop the competencies and skills of new midlevel managers. The study impacts social change by seeking an end-state of enhanced or improved processes and fostering the well-being of employees with engagement and empowerment. The literature review provided a comprehensive understanding of the development of ideas, arguments, trends, and gaps in UET, midlevel managers, and leadership development.

- Section 2: This section explored my role as the researcher and participants' role in the study process. The study employed a qualitative research methodology and a pragmatic inquiry design as they best align with the study's objective and develop meaning through interpreting the phenomenon. I focused on ethical research pertaining to protecting participants' rights and extending dignity, safety, and well-being. This section provided an in-depth understanding of informed consent, study withdrawal, incentives, and participant protection. This section also covered data with a focus on collection techniques, organization techniques, and data analysis. I emphasized research quality by ensuring the reliability and validity of the data. This section ends the requirements for the doctoral proposal.
- Section 3 reemphasized the purpose of the study and transition into the findings. During this section, themes emerged from the coding process, enabling the development of conclusions. The results addressed the

research question and contributed to professional business practice and implications for social change. An in-depth understanding of the topic and reflection of the participants' experience enabled the development of recommendations for future research.

Section 2: The Project

- Section 2 addresses the purpose statement, my role as the researcher, participants, research method, research design, justification of the population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instrument, data collection technique, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability, and validity, concluding with a transition and summary.

Purpose Statement

- The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to explore strategies used by senior leaders to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of operations. The research methodology was qualitative, and the pragmatic inquiry design included semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The target population included eight senior leaders who supervised midlevel leaders. The geographical location was the Department of the Army in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The study may contribute to social change as the results may provide insight into new leaders transitioning into an organization and their strategies for decision-making and implementing actions. These strategies can affect how employees respond and whether the new leader's actions can sustain operations or create organizational instability. The recommendation that derived from the study may benefit other organizations that experience leader turnover. The suggestions may help other researchers who want to leverage the conceptual framework of UET in their research about leader characteristics, strategies, organizational turnover, and organization sustainability.

Role of the Researcher

- Researchers play a pivotal role in the data collection process because if done inadequately, improperly, or poorly, data collection could compromise the quality and credibility of the entire study (Stenfors et al., 2020). Yoon and Uliassi (2022) referred to the "researcher-as-instrument," indicating that a researcher is an essential tool that plays a vital role in data collection, interpretation, and findings, and at any point during the research that requires defining data (p. 1088). An essential step in the process is preparation, which can include possessing desired attributes, skills, and values, such as creating a rich dialogue based on asking good questions, being able to absorb information through unbiased and active listening, being agile and adaptive to pivot when required, having an expert understanding of the issue for interpretation and inference purposes, and conducting research that is ethical and bias-free (Yin, 2018). Other methodologies for preparation include training and conducting a pilot study. I conducted a pilot study as a requirement of one of my Walden University courses. I collected and analyzed data to develop themes that enabled objective and unbiased conclusions. I also employed ethical principles for informed consent and participant protection. My professional experience includes 20 years of military service as a leader and supervisor and 20 years as a senior Department of the Army civilian supervising leaders and midlevel managers. I understand leadership development because I have been a recipient of development as well as a mentor guiding development, and I have led numerous efforts to develop organizational personnel. Although I understand leadership development, as a researcher, I was responsible for conducting an objective, ethical data collection and analysis process free of bias, coercion, and influence.

- Researchers are ultimately responsible for ensuring that all participants sign an informed consent form, ensuring that each contributor has autonomy, maximizing benefits and minimizing harm to participants, and treating each participant fairly and equally. The Belmont Report formulated by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1979 identifies ethical principles and guidelines for protecting participants (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The Belmont Report focuses on three basic principles specific to the treatment of research participants: *respect for persons*, which refers to acknowledging autonomy and diminished autonomy; *beneficence*, which refers to doing no harm, maximizing benefits, and minimizing harm; and *justice*, which relates to fairness based on equal share, individual need, individual effort, societal contribution, and merit (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

- To mitigate the potential for bias or viewing from a personal lens, I (a) used reflexivity as a tool throughout the study to examine my decisions and actions and to maintain awareness of my own subjectivity; (b) purposely and deliberately established a sampling design that included participants who would provide rich data to optimize data sources for addressing the research question; (c) employed ethical principles in recruitment, informed consent, participant protection, and use of the interview protocol; (d) used triangulation by converging data from interviews and public domain documents to establish rigor in the study; (e) used trustworthiness and integrity in the data analysis phase, which included use of best practices and tools to assist with data transcription, coding, and establishing themes; and (f) methodically interpreted the results with consideration of the conceptual framework to draw valid conclusions and generate new theories (Johnson et al., 2020; Lanka et al., 2020; Stenfors et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016; Yin, 2018).
- I used an interview protocol to prepare for the interview process and guide me and the participants through it (Roberts, 2020; Yin, 2018). The interview protocol provided structure and included specifics about the study and its purpose as part of the protocol script or as an attachment. Other information provided in the protocol document that served as a scene setter included the interview's date, time, and location. It included

welcoming remarks, an overview of the study and its purpose, revalidation of consent for participation and audio recording, semi-structured questions for probing and follow-up, and the opportunity for the participant to offer any additional comments. The interview protocol concluded with comments of appreciation and an overview of what would follow the interview (Roberts, 2020). The protocol also allowed the participants to review the summarized synthesis (member checking) to ensure that I accurately captured the participant's perceptions. See the interview protocol in Appendix B.

Participants

- Participants play an essential role in designing quality and rigorous research. Yin (2018) defined a participant as a person from whom research study data are collected. In qualitative research, researchers seek to provide a deep understanding of study concepts and relationships through nonrandom participants who can contribute rich descriptions and perspectives (Knechel, 2019). I pursued participants most beneficial in addressing the research question through their direct and personal knowledge of the study phenomena (Gill, 2020). This sampling design aligns with purposive sampling focusing on participants to optimize data sources. Based on my knowledge and experience of the topic and seeking the participants who would best align with my research goals and ethical guidelines, I pursued eight individuals with direct knowledge and experience with developing midlevel managers. These participants were senior leaders with 8 or more years of supervising and developing midlevel managers.

- Identifying the target population for research is one of the first steps in preparing for data collection. The next challenge is gaining access to participants. I proceeded with a formal informed consent process after contacting prospective participants and obtaining a verbal participation agreement. Informed consent is the process of obtaining participants' permission before they take part in a study. According to Pickering (2021), informed consent involves an individual voluntarily accepting what another person advises or desires and their cooperation, concurrence, or permission. Ensuring that participants are fully informed about the study's goals, methods, potential risks and benefits, and any other pertinent information affecting their decision to participate is a moral obligation and a legal necessity (World Medical Association, 2013). The consent form gave the participant sufficient information to make informed consent decisions. The document included the purpose of the study; the prerequisites for and consequences of participating; participant rights; my plans for analyzing, reporting, and storing the data; and whom to contact with questions.
- My responsibilities as the researcher did not end with accepting the participant's consent. To maintain participants' confidence, I established a

relationship based on ethical standards, trust, and collaboration (Nunan, 2020). Failure to foster and sustain a professional relationship with the participant could be at the detriment of the research as the participant could withdraw from the study at any time and refuse consent for further use of the data. Establishing a solid relationship is the foundation for rich and meaningful data collection. My strategy for building and sustaining a relationship with my research participants was establishing a foundation based on respect, empathy, transparency, and responsiveness and ensuring their protection and anonymity.

Research Method and Design

- Research method and design are foundational aspects of scientific inquiry, guiding data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The method involves procedures and techniques, while the design provides the overall structure to ensure systematic and ethical research.

Research Method

- For this study, I used a qualitative research methodology as it was the method that aligned with my study's objective and was most conducive to developing meaning through the construct of interpretation of a phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2015). Qualitative research focuses on building upon existing theories instead of testing theories (Crick, 2021). Interviews are the most common qualitative research method as the data derived from interviews provide contextual information and building of rich knowledge through reflectivity and interpretation of the phenomena (Coleman, 2022). Witell et al. (2020) highlighted four essential characteristics of qualitative research: (a) *interesting*, which refers to appealing to readers' curiosity and enticing them to want to continue reading; (b) *rigorous*, which refers to meaningfulness, transparency, and traceability; (c) *relevant*, which refers to the research addressing the "so what" for practical purposes; and (d) *rich*, which refers to reflecting the depth and quality of the research.

- The qualitative characteristics inspire confidence and add credibility to the findings. Through qualitative research, I accessed study participants who could provide rich data through their experiences and perceptions and explore a depth of information to comprehend the phenomenon (Crick, 2021). Amos (2022) argued that qualitative research has generalization and prediction limitations, is highly subjective, and depends on interpretive data. These characteristics contribute to the potential for research, researcher, and participant bias. I conducted semi-structured interviews of eight senior leaders who managed midlevel managers to identify strategies for developing new midlevel managers transitioning into an organization for sustainable operations. To counter the potential for bias, I employed ethical research standards and practices to ensure a quality study with validity and reliability. Other research methodologies include quantitative and mixed methods.

- The quantitative methodology involves examining relationships between performance variables by analyzing statistical data, using an inductive approach to testing theories, and determining the predictive power (Cash et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2015). Quantitative analysis involves using experiments and surveys and collecting data on predetermined instruments that yield statistical data to address the hypothesis. The essential elements of qualitative analysis are population and sample, as inappropriate samples may lead to erroneous conclusions (Bourgie & Sekaran, 2019; Cash et al., 2022). Unlike qualitative analysis, the potential for bias is low in quantitative analysis, which is an objective assessment that achieves statistically high validity and reliability (Saunders et al., 2015). A quantitative methodology was not the most effective analysis to support my study as understanding the phenomena of my topic requires participant interaction through interviews to capture the participants' behavior and real-life experiences and perceptions.
- The mixed method integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to get deeper insight into the research problem and to help understand complex social issues. Due to the unique data collection and analysis associated separately with qualitative and quantitative approaches, the mixed approach draws on diverse and extensive approaches to data collection and analysis (Osei & Cheng, 2023). Researchers consider the mixed method the most difficult because it is complex and requires the

ability and skills to conduct different types of analysis (Amos, 2022). This approach can also require an extensive study that may be costly and time-consuming. However, there are advantages to a mixed study approach, such as the ability to triangulate with the use of various methods, the complementary effects of using the two methods, the potential for further examination based on additional questions and problems, and the expansive scope of the study (Truong et al., 2020). This approach would not have supported my study as the quantitative portion of the mixed method supports studies with large amounts of data that support statistical analysis. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) number is 09-29-23-1163307.

Research Design

- In conducting a qualitative study, I considered four qualitative research designs to address my research question. The designs were pragmatic inquiry, phenomenology, ethnography, and case study. I chose the pragmatic inquiry as it was the best approach to assist my efforts in collecting data to answer my research question. Kelly and Cordeiro (2020) and Saunders et al. (2015) suggested that a pragmatic approach with its epistemological focus enables centering on a practical understanding of real-world issues and conducting research to arrive at practical outcomes. Pragmatism as a research paradigm supports the theory that there can be single or multiple realities based on socially constructed knowledge unique to an individual's experiences (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The premise of pragmatism is that knowledge and reality depend on the social constructs of beliefs and habits. An underpinning of pragmatic inquiry is that social experiences influence perception; perception is a reality for individuals, perceptions produce actionable knowledge, and actionable knowledge helps to solve existential problems (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Saunders et al., 2015). The pragmatic approach allowed me not to focus on an organization but rather seek out respondents' experiences through interviewing and asking semi-structured, open-ended questions that asked how and what (Walden University, 2016d).

- The phenomenology design focuses on individuals sharing their lived experiences and perceptions of phenomena based on their viewpoint on reality (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). An individual's and researcher's conscious experience contains the truth and significance of a phenomenon (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Interviews are the primary data collection source, with the suggested use of unstructured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with people who have experienced the same phenomena (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Additional data collection, such as observations and diaries, can serve as supportive data. Researchers use the phenomenology design when exploring a larger concept or idea and studies focused on people who experienced the same phenomena. While the phenomenology design is closely related to pragmatic inquiry, it was not the design best suited for my study as I intended to interview eight senior leaders with a pragmatic focus on actionable knowledge, understanding connections between experience, knowing and doing, and understanding the experiential process of the inquiry (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020).

- The ethnography design describes the cultural norms that members of a particular group of people share and learn, such as their values, beliefs, behavior, language, and communication (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In an ethnographic study, researchers interact, converse, and engage with participants in their everyday lives over a period. Types of data collection include collecting data using various methods such as observation, interviews, audio-video records, and document reviews (Renjith et al., 2021).
- A case study design helps explore a phenomenon through various lenses and data sources within its naturally occurring context to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon (Rashid et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). According to Yin (2018), to describe a phenomenon and context, a case study will use and combine several sources of evidence. The sources of evidence could include interviews, surveys, observation, personal diaries, field notes, and archival data (Yin, 2018). Researchers use case studies to stimulate new research, contradict established theories, give new insights into a phenomenon, and permit investigations of otherwise inaccessible situations (Yin, 2018). The case study design is applicable to focusing on

an individual, group, institution, or event (Saunders et al., 2015). The critical criterion for determining if a case study is the appropriate approach is a bounded system that defines and delimits the case (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). A case study was not best suited for my study because my research built upon existing theories instead of developing, testing, refining, extending, or challenging established theories.

Ethical Research

- Dedication to ethical principles is essential in research to guarantee the study's objectivity, reliability, and significance. Ethical research protects all parties involved in research activities and the broader societal contexts affected by its findings. The ability of ethical research to encourage fairness and trust is what makes it so significant. It gives researchers a framework to protect participant rights, dignity, safety, and well-being and conduct research without bias or manipulation (Kaewkungwal & Adams, 2019). The IRB plays an essential role in ethical research as its primary concern is ensuring compliance with ethical standards and the protection of study participants by evaluating proposed data collection procedures (Walden University, 2021). Failing to follow ethical research guidelines for informed consent, study withdrawal, incentives, and protection of participants may unintentionally harm participants or generate questionable analysis and findings, compromising its validity and societal usefulness (Yin, 2018).

Informed Consent

- The informed consent process is essential to research and is unwavering. Pickering (2021) defines informed consent as a voluntary agreement of what someone else suggests or wants, compliance, concurrence, or permission. According to the Declaration of Helsinki Ethical Principles (World Medical Association, 2013), prospective study participants must receive adequate information regarding the study's objectives, design, methods, anticipated benefits, and potential risks, to make an informed decision about consenting. The participant decides to take part in the study voluntarily. Informed consent must be conditions-free, with no coercion or undue influence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Participants have the right to expect me as the researcher to abide by the parameters of the consent granted and not to later discover my intent to extend the interview's duration or broaden its scope without their approval (Saunders et al., 2015).
- Saunders et al. (2015) refer to a continuum of a lack of consent, inferred consent, and informed consent. A lack of consent includes deception, whereas informed consent provides the participant with enough information to make an informed choice. Inferred consent assumes that participation in the study would result in analyzing, using, storing, and reporting data without full disclosure to the participant (Saunders et al., 2015).

Withdrawing From the Study

- Research participants have the same rights to withdraw as they do for informed consent (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). Researchers are responsible for ensuring the participant's right to withdraw without fear of reprisal (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The principle that consents are revocable may apply to personal data as well. This claim applies to data withdrawal and participation (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Researchers should advise participants of their right to withdraw from the study by including it in the informed consent form.

Incentives

- Financial rewards positively correlate with the amount and quality of research performance (Kim & Bak, 2020). However, participants can perceive incentives as supportive, which increases research performance, while others view them as controlling, resulting in decreased research performance. According to Kim and Bak (2020), an incentive perceived as controlling is synonymous with crowding out, a self-reported interest that diminishes a participant's intrinsic motivation. I offered an incentive to participants for volunteering their time, expertise, and perspectives.

Protection of Participants

- Participants play an essential role in research. Researchers are responsible for ensuring their protection according to the ethical principles in guiding documents or processes such as the Belmont Report and the IRB. The

Belmont Report focuses on fundamental ethical principles and guidelines that support the protection of participants and provide an analytical framework to guide the resolution of ethical issues related to research (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The three principles include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The Belmont Report focuses on respect from the perspective of voluntary participation based on giving adequate information.

- Saunders et al. (2015) address the social responsibility of researchers to be open, honest, and respect the dignity of participants to build a trusting relationship. Beneficence includes ethically treating participants by protecting them from harm and ensuring their well-being. Not harming participants can include protection from embarrassment, stress, discomfort, pain, or conflict (Saunders et al., 2015). Justice emphasizes equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of research and the proper selection of participants. Saunders et al. (2015) focus on researcher integrity and objectivity to ensure data and findings' accuracy and truthful representation. The purpose of the IRB is to protect the rights and welfare of individuals serving as participants in research (Walden, 2016d). I protected participants by employing best practices through proactive risk assessment, a fully informed and voluntary consent process, an open and honest participant-researcher relationship, and robust data management procedures. I looked to the Walden University IRB to scrutinize my familiarity with the pragmatic inquiry study research, how I planned to interact with the participants, the use of data collection instruments, and how I ensured the protection of the participants (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection Instruments

- In a qualitative study, I was the link to data collection and the instrument because of the close, interactive relationship with the participants (Billups, 2019). Other data collection instruments in qualitative research include field notes, diaries, observations, and archived records. For this qualitative study, I was the data collection instrument to gather valid and reliable information to help address my study's research question (Saunders et al., 2015). I collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate method for capturing participants' experiences through face-to-face interaction.

Data Collection Technique

- Researchers use semi-structured interviews to capture perceptions, perspectives, and experiences from participants with direct knowledge of the phenomena. I interviewed eight senior leaders who supervise midlevel managers. The interviews took place by using Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Oliffe et al. (2021) suggest that a benefit of interviewing via Microsoft Teams and Zoom is enabling participants to be in an environment in which they are comfortable while supporting a natural and spontaneous setting for free and candor interaction. Another benefit of

Microsoft Teams and Zoom is their ability to record the discussion, making transcription more efficient. I also used a handheld recorder to record each interview as a fail-safe method if I missed some of the salient points in my notes or the Microsoft Teams and Zoom produces garbled transcription during any part of the interview.

- There are three categories of interview designs: structured interviews that follow a rigid and predetermined list of questions often used in quantitative research; semi-structured interviews are less rigid as they may include open-ended and follow-up questions; and unstructured interviews are informal and more conversational with no set format or predetermined list of questions (Saunders et al., 2015). The semi-structured interview approach was the most appropriate for my study because it allowed participants to express themselves freely. I gained clarity with follow-up or probing questions. In preparation for collecting data through the interview process, I conducted a pilot test to detect any flaws early that may cause problems and to make process adjustments to the pre-interview, during the interview, and post-interview stages (Abd Gani et al., 2020). Using a pilot test helps establish validity and reliability in the research.
- The use of semi-structured interviews as a data collection technique has unique advantages and disadvantages that I considered in determining the most appropriate method based on my research goals, resources, and the context of my study. The advantages include the flexibility of asking

probing questions during interviews to explore further a response, participant elaboration to share an in-depth understanding of an experience or perception, personal interaction between me and the participant that may increase trust and confidence, resulting in richer information, and using triangulation to corroborate data (Crick, 2021; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). The disadvantages include the time consumption in conducting interviews, transcribing, and analyzing interviews, the potential for researcher bias, and the lack of standardization in questioning as opposed to a questionnaire (Crick, 2021; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018).

- I used an interview protocol in preparation for and throughout the interview process. Yang et al. (2018) posited that using an interview protocol will add procedural rigor and ensure ethical procedures, including researcher responsibilities and standardization of preparation and management procedures. After completing the selection process to identify eight senior leaders intimately knowledgeable of the strategies to develop midlevel managers for operational sustainability, I used ethical practices to obtain consent for the interview and use of a recording device. I coordinated with each participant to determine the most suitable setting (Microsoft Teams or Zoom) to conduct the interview. The interview protocol included information on the study background and purpose, address confidentiality, reinforce their rights as participants, the interview format, my use of a recording device, a list of the opening, probing, and closing questions, and discuss member checking and my point of contact information (Crick, 2021; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). See the interview protocol in Appendix B.

- Quality denotes the rigor, strength, and confidence in research from planning, data collection and analysis, and findings (Saunders et al., 2015). Reliability and validity are essential in research as they support data that is sound, credible, and replicable (Yin, 2018). Rose & Johnson (2020) suggested that reliability brings soundness to research in the application of methods and consistency and clarity in the conduct of research that will enable other researchers to discern and undertake the research methods. Validity supports the fidelity of research. Researchers can achieve reliability and validity within the doctoral research process by using multiple sources of evidence, having key informants review the study, and maintaining a chain of evidence. Houghton et al. (2013) posited that to include rigor in research, I could ensure credibility with triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking; dependability and confirmability with audit trail or outline research decisions, and reflexivity by maintaining a reflective diary; and transferability which includes thick descriptions that accounts for context, research methods, and raw data. As the researcher, I ensured consistency in recordings and transcripts (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Data Organization Techniques

- Qualitative research generates much data from the interview, note-taking, coding, and analysis phases. A technique that organizes and manages data logically and makes it easily accessible is essential to thematic analysis (Lester et al., 2020). Co-locating all audio recordings from interviews, scanning paper documents, converting handwritten notes into electronic files, generating naming conventions for all files, and creating a catalog system to track all data by categories, sources, storage locations, dates, and creators are a few techniques. This information can be efficiently uploaded to research aid programs like ATLAX, MAXQDA, and NVivo if collected logically and electronically. Journaling is a data source from mine's or the participant's self-reflection. This data can include their thoughts, ideas, beliefs, daily accounting, and feelings from the interviews and interactions (Shufutinsky, 2020). Researchers should include this data type in the cataloging aligned with the appropriate interview, day, theme, or other category. I organized and cataloged my data using an Excel spreadsheet that I protect using a password. I kept the information on a flash drive in case of corruption or inaccessibility to the spreadsheet. I secured the flash drive in a locked storage container. After 5 years, I will destroy all electronic copies.

Data Analysis

- The data collection phase of the study consisted of myself as the instrument. A principle of data collection is using multiple sources (Yin, 2018). I collected data through interviews, notes, and public domain documents. Triangulation is collecting from different sources to corroborate the research's findings, broaden the scope of the findings, and increase the richness of the findings (Crick, 2021). Triangulation increases the credibility and reliability of research by reducing the potential for bias sometimes found in a single data collection method (Noble & Heale, 2019). There are four types of triangulations: data triangulation which uses multiple sources, investigator triangulation which focuses on different researchers, theory triangulation which uses different theoretical schemes; and methodological triangulation, which uses different data collection methods (Noble & Heale, 2019; Yin, 2018). I used a methodological method to draw data from interviews, notes, and public domain documents. Triangulation is an essential part of the analysis phase.
- Thematic analysis is a foundational method of analyzing classifications and themes in qualitative analysis (Saunders et al., 2015). Thematic analysis enabled me to extract information from data collection and systematically and comprehensively identify numerous cross-references or patterns between the data and the research's evolving theme from an inductive or deductive approach (Lochmiller, 2021; Saunders et al., 2015).

I used an inductive approach to shape my analysis and, through the lens of the UET, inferred meaning about the participant's experience (Saunders et al., 2015). Saunders et al. (2015) identified six phases of thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. This process analyzes the data without engaging pre-existing themes, which means it is adaptable to any research that relies on participants' understanding, interpretation, and clarification of the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

- As the researcher, I achieved familiarization with the data collected through the data collection process, reading and rereading, transcribing, coding, theming, interpreting, and analyzing (Saunders et al., 2015). Through these in-depth engagements, I thoroughly understood the phenomena and participants' perspectives and found rich meaning in the evidence to establish findings. After interviewing and transcribing, I used coding to categorize data with similar themes or meanings. Coding enabled the accessibility of specific data in a manageable format as I moved into further analysis (Saunders et al., 2015). Coding is an essential component of thematic analysis because, during this process, I began to identify patterns (Crick, 2020; Lochmiller, 2021). The codes derived from actual terms used by my participants, self-developed labels that best describe the data, or terms already existing in theory or literature

(Saunders et al., 2015). To ensure adherence to validity and reliability standards, I established well-defined, rigorous, and consistently applied coding procedures. I used data from the interviews, my notes, and public domain documents to develop codes using NVivo to search for key and sub-themes to identify patterns.

Reliability and Validity

- Data quality refers to the reliability, validity, completeness, and consistency that fulfills the expectations of given requirements in research (Hassenstein & Vanella, 2022). Saunders et al. (2015) considered reliability and validity measures as centric to data quality in qualitative research. Some of the issues that could negatively impact doctoral research are a lack of alignment between the measures assessing the phenomenon and their intended purpose; inaccuracy within the analysis and relationships; lack of validity in the research findings; and lack of repetitiveness that show the same results (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018).

Reliability

- Rose and Johnson (2020) suggested that reliability brings soundness to research in the application of methods and consistency and clarity in the conduct of research that will enable other researchers to discern and undertake the research methods. To prevent jeopardizing dependability, I implemented tactics to prevent perceptions of false documentation of data and interpretation (Yin, 2018). The measures I used to ensure trustworthy and replicable findings were triangulation using multiple datasets, peer debriefing for review and assessment of transcripts and themes, member checking for respondent validation of data, and conducting a pilot study to test my research approach (Crick, 2021; Pathiranage et al., 2020; Yin, 2018).

Validity

- Validity refers to how well a method, instrument, or technique measures the study's intended phenomenon, the accuracy of the analysis, and the accuracy of the results from the perspective of myself, the participants, and the research's end users (Rose & Johnson, 2020; Saunders et al., 2015). There is no one-size-fits-all validity technique for qualitative research, as I based it on its context and the research objective (FitzPatrick, 2019). Validation techniques that assess the soundness of qualitative research are credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation.

Credibility

- Credibility addresses internal validity in qualitative research. The focus is on the believability of the study's outcomes and if the outcomes are consistent with the participants' representation of the phenomena (Saunders et al., 2015). Establishing credibility includes using rigorous techniques and methods, such as collecting and analyzing sufficient data, member checking, peer review, using an interview protocol, and triangulation (Crick, 2021; FitzPatrick, 2019; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I used an interview protocol to support credibility, enabling a structured and efficient interview process. I employed ethical practices by establishing a rapport and positive relationship with the participants, clearly articulating the purpose of the study and their role, and being honest, transparent, empathetic, and responsive. I conducted interviews using Microsoft Teams and Zoom to enable establishing a transcript using applicable software. With the respondents' permission, I also used a handheld recorder to ensure an alternative method for accurately representing the interview. After transcribing the interviews, I coordinated with the participants to validate my interpretation of their responses. I also triangulated participant data collection with public domain information to further validate the findings.

Transferability

- Transferability addresses external validity in qualitative research. Singh et al. (2021) defines *transferability* as the degree of transferrable findings applicable to similar contexts, populations, and settings. I enhanced transferability by providing thick descriptions of the background, the research methodology, participant selection criteria., member checks, purposive sampling, and triangulation. These strategies provide sufficient information for readers to make informed judgments about the study's similarities and differences and determine the transferability to their study (Amir et al., 2021).

Confirmability

- Credibility is essential in ensuring rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research. Confirmability addresses credibility and trustworthiness by researchers conducting repetitive checks to ensure the data collection, analysis, and findings reflect the participant's narrative, member checking, and researcher reflexivity to recognize their bias (Amir et al., 2021). Triangulation is another rigorous research method that enables the convergence of evidence to help strengthen the findings (Saunders et al., 2015). These methods precluded the potential of bias derived from researchers incorporating their perspectives.

Data Saturation

- Saunders et al. (2015) define *data saturation* as a point in qualitative research when continuing data collection yields little to no new information, ideas, or themes. Upon reaching data saturation, data collection can cease (Mwita, 2022). Saturation ensures that the data collected is rich, diverse, and representative of the perspectives and experiences of the participants (Saunders et al., 2015). Data saturation was a primary consideration in determining the sample size and data collection method to comprehensively understand the study topic (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The intricacy of the phenomenon examined by me, the complexity of the research topic, and the diversity of the sample all influence the point of saturation (Mwita, 2022). When a study topic reaches saturation, it becomes increasingly improbable that including additional participants or data can meaningfully improve or change the comprehension of it (McGinley et al., 2021). To obtain saturation in qualitative research, researchers apply a variety of techniques. Purposive sampling is a frequent strategy in which participants are chosen based on their applicability to the research topic and their capacity to offer insightful and diverse information (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Transition and Summary

- Section 2: This section explored my role and the participants' roles in the study process. This study employed a qualitative research methodology and a pragmatic inquiry design as they best align with the study's objective and develop meaning through interpreting the phenomenon. I focused on ethical research about protecting participants' rights and extending dignity, safety, and well-being. This section provided an in-depth understanding of informed consent, study withdrawal, incentives, and participant protection. Data collection identified me as the instrument and the data collection technique, which included conducting semi-structured interviews using Microsoft Teams or through Zoom to capture the perceptions, perspectives, and experiences of senior leaders who currently supervise and develop subordinate leaders. The interview process included an interview protocol that will guide me throughout the interview.

- Establishing methodical data organization techniques will ensure easy data access and assist in using the data collected from multiple sources to conduct analysis. I used triangulation of the data sources to increase credibility and reliability. This section emphasized the study's importance of reliability and validity to enhance its richness and quality. I also expounded on credibility, transferability, and confirmability as other measures of ensuring rigor. Lastly, I focused on data saturation as the point when continuing data collection yields little to no new information.
- Section 3 reemphasized the purpose of the study and transition into the findings. During this section, themes emerged from the coding process, enabling researchers to develop conclusions. The results addressed the research question and contributed to professional business practice and implications for social change. Through an in-depth understanding of the topic and reflection on their experience, researchers can offer recommendations for future research and identify any biases, preconceived ideas, and values. This section will conclude the study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

- This qualitative pragmatic inquiry study explored strategies that senior leaders use to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of operations. Eight senior leaders provided the data for this study through semi-structured interviews. These senior leaders have years of experience as supervisors of midlevel managers. The senior leaders shared their experiences and perceptions of strategies used to successfully transition new midlevel managers into an organization to maintain continuity of operations. The study analysis revealed five themes to help organizations support the transitions of midlevel managers: (a) being knowledgeable of the organization during change, (b) employing effective communication skills, (c) being a flexible and adaptive leader, (d) employing measures of performance, (e) and recommendations for formal and informal leader development. Finally, the findings correlated what drives leaders' strategy formulation, decision-making, and leading with the study's conceptual theory, UET. Section 3 consists of an introduction, presentation of findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendation for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and a conclusion.

Presentation of Findings

- The overarching research question was the following: What effective strategies do senior leaders use to develop midlevel managers to sustain operations during their organizational transition? I employed a methodological triangulation process to collect data from interviews, member checking, and documents in the public domain. This process helped corroborate the research's findings and reach data saturation. There were limitations in my corroboration efforts due to my inability to access official organizational command climate surveys.

Interview Findings

- The research participants included eight senior leaders with over 10 years of experience supervising and developing midlevel managers. Seven of the eight senior leaders currently manage midlevel managers, while one senior leader retired within the last 6 months. I reached saturation with the semi-structured and probing interview questions when the questions failed to yield new information. I used labels P1 through P8 to identify my interview participants and to protect their identity. Upon completing data collection, I used NVivo 14 to code, categorize, and recategorize the data. This process resulted in the emergence of five themes: (a) being knowledgeable of the organization during change, (b) employing effective communication skills, (c) being a flexible and adaptive leader, (d) employing measures of performance, and (e) recommendations for formal and informal leader development. The findings of these themes align with the information provided in this study's literature review. Section 3 also correlates what drives leaders' strategy formulation, decision-making, and leading with the study's conceptual theory, UET.

Theme 1: Being Knowledgeable of the Organization

The analysis revealed that for new leaders, it is essential to learn about the organization's mission, responsibilities, and processes to equip themselves with the requisite knowledge and insights to lead effectively, drive performance, and achieve organizational goals. Understanding the organization's mission, vision, and objectives and knowing the leaders and stakeholders are essential for assimilating into the organization. This understanding enables leaders to align their strategies and actions with the organization's goals. Leaders frequently face complex decisions and challenges (Lee & Suh, 2023). McKenney and Holly (2019) considered a lack of understanding a "skills gap," which they defined as the gap between the abilities a person now holds and the criteria for a position. A deep understanding of the organization's goals can provide structure to assess options and guide leaders through making well-informed decisions in the organization's best interest.

An essential element of learning an organization is having the ability for active listening. Active listening is the foundation of effective leadership. It enables leaders to forge deep bonds with subordinates, make wise decisions, solve problems, and successfully lead the team to achieve objectives. Active and effective listening is paying attention to what others say, interpreting fairly, being receptive, and understanding the team's needs, concerns, and ideas (Macnamara, 2020). This kind of listening is essential to learning and development, establishing rapport and trust, obtaining a variety of viewpoints and insights for decision-making and problem-solving, and bringing about change.

Theme 2: Employing Effective Communication Skills

This theme was the most important as all the participants stated its relevance from the perspective of verbal and written communication, interpersonal skills, humility, and team building. Communicating clearly and concisely facilitates an understandable exchange of information that captures the topic's essence. Through dialogue, communication cultivates a culture of understanding, collaboration, and dedication. The essential and ubiquitous process of communication can impact every part of an organization and have a favorable or unfavorable effect on creativity, transformation, productivity, and goal achievement (Sadaric & Skerlavaj, 2023; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021). P4 expressed, "The inability to communicate, the failure to relinquish the reins and allow for your employees to accomplish whatever the mission is all dovetails into a very unsuccessfully run organization." P3 gave perspective on leaders' communications by stating,

> I am talking about their ability to communicate, their ability to show that they care for their subordinates, and how they communicate to their subordinates to inspire them. Again, I'm not talking about coming in saying whoa, let's go crazy. I'm talking about kindness and gentleness and giving them a proper amount of praise, trust, and respect to motivate their subordinates.

The participant feedback aligns with the study's research that suggests that communication is the midlevel manager's most effective tool if used properly.

The findings included a quote by LTG John M. Scholfield from 1879:

> The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an Army. It is possible to impart instruction and give commands in such a manner and such a tone of voice as to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. (U.S. Air Force Academy, 2016)

The quote primarily supports discipline but also addresses the impact of respectful behavior and communication as a motivator.

Communication is essential in interpersonal skills and building relationships from the perspective of leaders' ability to be humble in their interactions with employees. Humility involves leading with a sense of self-awareness and focusing on others, which includes an interest in others' welfare, uplifting others, and the ability to place the needs of others above the self (Council & Sowcik, 2021). Humility is further defined as "leading from the ground" or "bottom-up leadership" and characterized as modest leaders having an accurate perspective of their subordinates, recognizing and valuing others' contributions and strong points, and being receptive to new ideas and criticism (Aarif, 2022, p. 1). Leaders can be the best in their field, but the employees will show resistance if they perceive their communication and behavior as boastful, bragging, or not humble. A key aspect of humility in leaders is their ability to acknowledge their errors, provide transparency, and learn from them. This type of leadership cultivates an environment of trust, respect, and continuous improvement.

Theme 3: Being a Flexible and Adaptive Leader

This leader development strategy supports combining flexibility, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and effective communication skills to navigate the complexities of leaders with multifaceted responsibilities, such as midlevel managers transitioning into an organization (Karneli, 2023). To maintain continuity and strategic advantage, leaders must be flexible, adaptive, and resilient to lead in a complex and uncertain environment (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). It aligns with the study's highlight of midlevel manager transitions and change challenges. The focus is on leaders being open to change and adjusting their strategies, plans, and methods to support organizational continuity and progress. It is analogous to the flexibility and adaptability that coaches must have in football. They constantly adjust the players' position and style of play based on the opponent's strategy and the game's flow. This scenario is comparable to how adaptability as a leader enables one to overcome unforeseen obstacles and grasp the chances presented by changing conditions.

Theme 4: Measures of Performance

This theme highlights leader development strategies using measures of performance (MOP) to quantify leaders' efficiency and effectiveness in achieving specific objectives or goals. These MOPs play an essential role in the performance evaluation process for assessing leaders' current strengths and weaknesses and evaluating the effectiveness of leader development through feedback (Alves & Lourenço, 2023).

Management uses MOP processes to establish performance standards by contrasting the actual performance attained with the expected performance outlined in the target (Norlina, 2022). MOPs are a part of the overall performance management process that includes establishing clear and attainable goals and objectives, monitoring measures (accountability), providing feedback, and performance improvement. Leadership should align the goals and objectives with the strategic goals and vision of the organization. MOPs include objective or subjective measures. P1 provides a simplistic analogy of an objective measure of a car salesman. The objective standard is to sell 100 cars every month. While a more realistic measure may be to sell 10 cars monthly, the objective is clear and measurable: Either the salesman meets the performance standard or does not. More difficult to measure are subjective standards. Further, using the car dealership scenario, the subjective standard is to make the customers happy. The objective is a soft standard and more challenging to measure. However, the use of customer surveys may provide corresponding feedback.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provides a MOP process applicable to federal employees of grades GS15 and below through performance planning designed to develop elements and standards (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2017). The first five of OPM's eight-step process focuses on the supervisor and employees measuring results. Those five steps are (a) planning, which involves setting performance measures and goals for individuals to channel their efforts toward achieving organizational objectives; (b) monitoring, which includes consistently measuring performance for accountability and providing feedback through progress reviews; (c) developing, which includes addressing poor performance and improving good performance; (d) rating, which includes summarizing employee performance while comparing performance over time; and (e) rewarding, which involves recognizing and incentivizing performance (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2017). Organizations use employee performance plans to record elements (objectives) and performance standards (metrics). The elements and standards should be understandable, measurable, attainable, fair, and challenging.

Accountability is an essential aspect of performance management. Accountability in performance metrics for developing leaders encompasses evaluating outcomes, fostering an environment in which leaders continuously learn and grow, and coordinating their activities with the goals and objectives of the company (Han & Hong, 2019). Meeting predetermined goals requires answering questions regarding assigned responsibilities. Holding midlevel managers accountable for performance improvement can produce dynamic, successful, and responsible leaders who can meet the demands of their roles with increased effectiveness and efficiency.

Theme 5: Formal and Informal Leader Development

The study's findings highlighted numerous strategies for formal and informal leader development. The participants focused on strategies, which included structured schools and training, individual development plans, and counseling. At the same time, the findings highlighted informal strategies that primarily focused on experiential training, such as coaching, mentorship, peer development, and 360-degree feedback assessment. Several participants expressed that the various leadership development strategies provide midlevel managers with an excellent learning opportunity; however, while theory is good, it does not replace gaining exposure and experience by being in the seat and doing the work. Another critical point is that although participants identified specific development training opportunities, they focused primarily on strategies that included identifying midlevel manager behavior and attributes that could contribute to successfully transitioning into an organization. In other words, identifying specific types of training to apply is situational based on the characteristics, competencies, and skills requiring enhancement. The leader development strategies identified in this theme confirm the strategies within the study.

Formal Development.

Structured Schools and Training. The participants' recommendations for schools included attending local or online colleges and taking advantage of the seminars and training sessions that could address gaps in the technical side of organizational knowledge and other competencies that require enhancing. Several participants leveraged their developmental experiences and recommended the OPM-sponsored Federal Executive Institute (FEI) courses as a compelling opportunity for leaders at the midlevel manager grade and higher (GS-14/GS-15) to obtain holistic developmental training. The FEI courses and similar courses focus on improving self-awareness, leadership and management skills, interorganizational collaboration and problem-solving, employee engagement, and more.

Individual Development Plan (IDP). An IDP is a tool that enables personnel to take charge of their growth by identifying areas that require improvement to meet the organization's goals, objectives, and mission (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.). Alignment of the midlevel manager's developmental efforts with the organization's mission, goals, and objectives benefits the individual and organization. The process allows for identifying and planning for the specific developmental efforts, schedule, cost, and other resources. While the individual takes ownership, the IDP is typically agreed upon and signed by both the supervisor and the individual supporting a partnership relationship. The supervisor acknowledges tasks and resources, can track progress, and enforces accountability.

Counseling. Counseling can be formal and informal. However, supervisors typically codify the standard approach in writing. Counseling can communicate good performance, but supervisors primarily use it to address and resolve poor performance in a three-step process: communicating expectations, identifying standards and performance problems, and establishing a path to improvement by specifying action (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2017).

Informal Development.

Coaching and Mentorship. The findings included recommendations for coaching and mentorship based on their processes and benefits. It confirmed the information comprehensively provided in the study. Leaders' capacity for self-awareness, introspection, candor, and transparency in their evaluation and feedback is critical to coaching and mentoring efficacy. While coaching and mentorship are distinct in their developmental approach, some similarities include requiring a foundation of trust and openness cultivated by a one-on-one relationship. There are many benefits for the coached or mentored individual, such as achieving goals, improving productivity and efficiency, career progression, enhancing self-assurance, and improving decision-making.

Left Seat Right Seat (LSRS). LSRS is a term used in the context of the military. The services use the vernacular when deploying and redeploying units overlap time so the new unit can learn the battlespace from the previous one (Watson, 2012). After the right-seated unit completes familiarization training, they move to the left seat while the relieving unit observes. Similarly, leader development includes matching the transitioning midlevel manager (right seat) with an experienced midlevel manager (left seat) with the same responsibilities and position for observing and learning. The process may include putting the transitioning midlevel manager in the left seat after a period to lead and receive feedback. It is a transition training process that could be formal or informal based on the extent of its structure.

360-Degree Feedback Assessment. The findings of the use and benefits of the 360-degree Feedback Assessment confirm the information provided in the study. The assessment benefits midlevel managers transitioning into an organization as an early assessment tool or for fully integrated leaders experiencing challenges. While this tool assesses feedback from the midlevel manager and internal stakeholders, the effectiveness of the outcome will depend on self-awareness that promotes honest and open feedback (Barry & McManigle, 2021). The outcome can be the basis for identifying developmental approaches tailored to the midlevel manager's needs.

Correlation to Conceptual Framework

In correlating what drives leaders' abilities for strategic thinking, decision-making, communicating, and leading, the findings align with the UET from the standpoint of experience being a key factor. Through probing interview questions, all participants believed that a leader's values and beliefs drive a leader's abilities. However, unlike the UET, the findings indicate a moral compass's impact on guiding leaders' actions and how to treat people. One of the participants equated narcissism to negative leadership behavior contrary to the UET's characterization of narcissism as an influencing trait for decision-making, strategic choice, and performance outcome (Fatfouta, 2019; O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020). The participants' perspective of successful leadership resonated less with the UET and more with the transformational leadership style, which is associated with motivating, empowering, inspiring, and appreciating the accomplishments of the team (Hai et al., 2022; Northouse, 2021). The participants' perspective also aligns with the contingency leadership theory, which focuses on the strategy, technology, uncertainty, size, and nature of the task that drive the influences of the environment and the insertion and adaptation of the organization (Fiedler, 1958; Hunt & Fedynich, 2019; Júnior & Pereira, 2023).

Application to Professional Practice

The findings and recommendations from this study have emphasized the importance of midlevel managers successfully transitioning into an organization to ensure effective leadership, strategic alignment, team engagement, and the overall health and success of the organization. Midlevel managers are central in an organization as they are the backbone, bridging the gap between strategic vision and operational execution, senior leadership, and lower-level managers or frontline staff (Fannon et al., 2021). They must navigate the multifaceted roles and responsibilities that require strong leadership competencies and technical and interpersonal skills to be successful. The findings and recommendations can help organizations identify and understand leader attributes, traits, competencies, and skills critical to personal and professional growth.

Leader development is pivotal in the transition process as it equips leaders with the necessary tools, knowledge, and mindset, enhancing their effectiveness and overall performance. The findings and recommendations highlight measures of performance designed to evaluate and enhance leaders' skills, competencies, and effectiveness. They provide a structured approach to identifying development needs, setting goals, and tracking progress for accountability. Organizations can use structured assessments to provide insight into a leader's strengths and identify improvement areas. The findings and recommendations provide formal and informal developmental approaches organizations can employ to address areas of weakness in their leaders. The developmental approaches can set a path of progression that benefits the individual and the organization.

Implications for Social Change

There are extensive implications for social change concerning leader development and positive outcomes for individuals and organizations. The positive outcome of leader development can manifest itself in many ways, including (1) ethical behavior that sets an example for others to emulate, (2) inclusivity that can promote an environment where people feel valued and respected, (3) socially responsible environment supportive of good citizenship and volunteerism, (4) serve as change agents with skills to guide the organization through transitions that may have social impacts, and (5) confidence and interpersonal skills that foster empowerment, encourage collaboration and engagement, and build relationships with internal and external stakeholders. These are just some of the implications of leader development on social change. The broad-ranging implications have the potential to improve an organization's internal culture and have a positive impact on society at large.

Recommendations for Action

The study's findings emerged with several recommendations for action. The first recommendation is for senior leaders to observe and assess how midlevel managers transition into an organization early on by observing their leadership style, knowledge of the organization, communication skills, and ability to interact and build relationships. More importantly, it assesses if the team is responsive to change, receptive to the midlevel manager's leadership style, and if the organization is sustaining successful operations. Suppose there are problems with the midlevel manager assimilating into the organization's culture, or there needs to be continuity of operations. In that case, the senior leader can provide further assessment of the midlevel manager by administering a 360-degree feedback assessment tool. Open and honest input from the midlevel manager, senior leader, staff, and peers can provide feedback that identifies strengths and weaknesses to establish a plan for leader development.

The second recommendation for action is to develop an individual development plan (IDP) that focuses on specific development efforts to improve areas of weakness.

The plan should include clear, measurable, and attainable goals and objectives that specify each objective's type of training, schedule, projected cost, and completion date. The senior leader should agree with the plan by signing the document acknowledging the commitment of resources and time. The midlevel manager should sign the document acknowledging responsibilities and commitment to achieve the objectives. The senior leader should use the document as a performance measure for tracking, enforcing, and accountability.

The third recommendation for action is identifying developmental approaches tailored to improve performance. The developmental approaches could include formal training such as structured schools, seminars, or other training focused on improving organizational knowledge; soft skills training that can help improve communications, interaction, and decision-making; and peer development that can include right-seating with an experienced leader successfully doing the same job. The informal developmental efforts that are effective include coaching and mentorship. The basis of these developmental efforts is the midlevel manager's self-reflection and self-awareness. It works only when open and honest communication and the midlevel manager is receptive to feedback.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings and recommendations of this study may add to the literature on strategies to transition leaders successfully into organizations. The findings identified various formal and informal developmental opportunities an organization could employ to help shape and enhance leader behavior. This study's limitations focused only on the internal strategies the organizations could employ. However, future researchers should explore extending development to a broader scope, which may include an external stakeholder such as the supporting human resource management office. The research can explore development from the perspective of organizational onboarding on a broad scale as a policy applicable to all employees transitioning into an organization, particularly in an environment of constant turnover and change.

Reflections

I started my doctoral journey with imposter syndrome, believing I would not measure up to peers much younger than me pursuing their postgraduate degrees. I was apprehensive of my writing abilities, handling the stress of balancing school, work, and home, using the technology associated with the journey, being overwhelmed, and fearing the unknown. Despite my doubts, I have been a lifelong learner and succeeded in all my endeavors. However, the source of my motivation to face my fears and dive head-on into this journey was my desire to complete the challenge, my mentoring subordinate leaders and encouraging them to take this same journey, and ultimately, my desire to retire and achieve my goal of teaching at the graduate level. The mantra that helped drive my momentum and overcome what I thought were obstacles was, "God did not bring me this far to leave me." The comment is an excerpt from the song "Can't Give Up Now" by the artist Mary. I listened to the song or repeated the mantra when I felt overwhelmed trying to balance my competing requirements. I am happy I stayed on the course because I learned so much, providing me with personal and professional growth.

It is through reflection that I chose the topic for this study. I have worked in a military environment for over 40 years and have directly observed the transition of hundreds of military and civilian personnel serving in leadership roles, including mostly midlevel managers serving as deputies and branch chiefs. In most cases, the leaders successfully transitioned into the organization by taking the time to understand the organization's mission and culture and building relationships. In contrast, I have also observed leaders who were not as successful in their transition due to poor leader behavior and actions that caused employee resistance and disruption. This study intended to present findings and recommendations of how organizations could address leader transition challenges through leader development. I appreciate the open and honest perceptions and assessments of eight experienced senior leaders who agreed to participate in the interview. Their participation provided invaluable insight, contributing to this study's findings and recommendations that can help organizations.

Conclusion

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry study explored strategies senior leaders use to transition new subordinate leaders into an organization to maintain continuity of operations. Leader development is pivotal in the transition process as it equips leaders with the necessary tools, knowledge, and mindset, enhancing their effectiveness and overall performance.

The study focused on leader development strategies for midlevel managers as they are the backbone of the organization responsible for bridging the gap between strategic vision and operational execution, senior leadership, and lower-level managers or frontline staff. The study included semi-structured interviews with eight senior leaders with direct knowledge and experience supervising and developing midlevel managers. Thematic analysis revealed five themes, which include: (a) being knowledgeable of the organization during change, (b) employing effective communication skills, (c) being a flexible and adaptive leader, (d) employing measures of performance, and (e) recommendations for formal and informal leader development. The findings also correlated the participants' perspective of what drives leaders' abilities for strategic thinking, decision-making, communicating, and leading with the UET. The social implications could enhance the internal culture of an organization and extend a positive influence on the broader society.

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Appendix A: LinkedIn Invitation

Research Participants Needed
for Study on Leader Development

There is a new study about leader development that could help organizational leaders better understand tailored development for mid-level leaders. For this study, you are invited to share your experiences and strategies for leader development to reduce challenges associated with leader turnover, change, or misalignment of leader attributes with the organization's culture or goals.

About the study:

- One 30-60 minute Zoom interview that will be audio-recorded
- You would receive a $20 gift card as a thank you
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Senior leaders with more than 5 years of experience supervising and developing LTC/GS-14 mid-level leaders
- Currently supervising mid-level leaders

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Marjorie McCants, a doctoral student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during OCT/NOV 2023.

Please reach out to Marjorie McCants, marjorie.mccants@waldenu.edu to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code: ______________Date: __________Time: ___________

Pre-Interview Protocol

1. Introduce myself to the participants, break the ice with light conversation (How was your day?), and thank them for their participation.
2. Provide a brief overview of the study and its purpose.
3. Explain the interview process and timing.
4. Provide participants with confidentiality and anonymity assurance.
5. Validate consent for the interview.
6. Validate consent for audio recording the interview.
7. Inform participants of their ability to withdraw from the research at any time.
8. Ask if the participant has questions at that point.
9. Begin the interview, which will last no longer than 60 minutes.
   a. How do changes in midlevel leaders impact organizational day-to-day operations, processes, and employee engagement in a dynamic, fast-paced work environment?
   b. What is your perspective on how your midlevel leaders assimilate into daily operations and the organization's culture upon arrival?
   c. What preconceived mindset or notions do new midlevel leaders have on how to lead, make decisions, and manage employees upon arriving in the organization?
   d. What effective leadership strategies do you use to help your leaders transition into a dynamic, fast-paced organization?
   e. What formal training or programs would you recommend for your midlevel leaders before or after arriving at the organization?

f. What informal training or programs would you recommend for your midlevel leaders before or after arriving at the organization?

g. What strategies would you recommend for a new midlevel leader to assimilate into the organizational culture (its mission, objectives, expectations, and values guiding its employees)?

h. How do you measure the effectiveness of your strategies for transitioning midlevel leaders into your organization?

i. Through the employment of your strategies, how do the employees receive the new midlevel leaders?

j. What else would you like to add regarding strategies to transition midlevel leaders into an organization?

10. Conclude Interview and thank the participants again, provide contact information for additional questions and concerns and stop the recording.

Post Interview Protocol

1. Establish a date for member checking.

2. Complete the interview transcription.

3. Transcribe the interviews verbatim and use the audio tape for validation of responses.

4. Share my interpretation and summary of responses with participants for transparency and information verification.

5. Establish a follow-up date with participants for questions and comments.

6. Thank the participants for their participation.

7. End of interview protocol