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The Role of Middle Management in Influencing Corporate Culture Change Success

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Robert Parsons

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

The Role of Middle Management in Influencing Corporate Culture Change Success

by

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MS, Franklin University, 2015

BS, Franklin University, 2013

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 25, 2024

Abstract

Failure of organizations' strategic change initiatives typically leads to continued mitigated financial performance. Grounded in transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore strategies and processes middle managers use to support and implement organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. The participants were four middle managers from two transportation companies in Ohio that experienced thriving organizational culture changes to increase organizational financial performance. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and reviewing public financial statements. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and three principal themes emerged: participating in organizational culture change strategies and plans, creating clear communication channels, and identifying and addressing key risks and barriers to culture change. A key recommendation is for middle managers to develop risk mitigation plans before rollout to employees. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve employee job satisfaction, morale, and health by reducing their stress and anxiety when experiencing organizational culture change with concomitant benefits to employees' families and communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research project to adopted kids everywhere, like myself. You may have started life in a rough or unstable home situation, but you can still adapt and overcome the challenges of life with the love and support of your new family. You can accomplish anything if you put in enough work and dedication and rise above the negatives in this world. There are many people in life that love and support you, even if it is not your biological family, and you can achieve big things despite the rough beginning.

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I could not have completed this doctoral study without the support of many people academically, professionally, and personally. First, I must thank the many middle managers in my past that made me realize there were deficiencies in implementing organizational culture change. If I had not witnessed breakdowns in culture change at the middle manager level resulting in extreme employee turnover, I never would have had the idea for this research.

I must also thank the different Walden faculty members and chairs who have worked with me on this research paper. I would like to thank Dr. Natalie Casale for getting me through the prospectus and most of the proposal stage with patience and fantastic feedback. I would like to thank Dr. Alex Lazzo for getting me over the proposal and first oral defense stage. I would like to thank Dr. Al Endres for taking over the post proposal and being a great partner in the research and final stages. I would finally like to thank Dr. Jorge Gaytan for being a tough but fair second chair. Your standards are high, but understanding and meeting them enabled me to get through the review by the college much more easily. In summary, I sincerely appreciate the patience and guidance provided by all faculty and advisors throughout this challenging but rewarding process.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Organizational culture is an invisible construct that employees create to survive in the fast-paced and result-oriented business world. Organizational culture is one of the most critical factors of financial success and a firm's response to its external environment (Schein, 2020). Yue et al. (2021) stated that organizational culture is more important and powerful than a firm's strategy. Organizational leaders should invest resources into an organizational culture that promotes and stimulates employee innovation, creativity, and high performance (Yue et al., 2021). Some employees in the United States view their direct manager's ability to adhere to a firm's stated mission statement and organizational goals and influence their employees' adherence as poor or mediocre (Yue et al., 2021). Simultaneously, organizational leaders increasingly rely on their dependence on human capital to obtain a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Bak et al., 2022). Organizations with a high-performance organizational culture based on human capital have the potential to develop a long-term competitive advantage (Meng & Berger, 2020). Organizations with middle managers having poor adherence to organizational goals risk losing a firm's competitive advantage (Meng & Berger, 2020).

Background of the Problem

U.S. employees often misplace or misjudge the importance of an organization's reputation, values and mission as well as the social and physical work environment (Yue et al., 2021). The way leaders treat employees may affect the volume and quality of the employees' work (Yue et al., 2021). Organizational leaders are responsible for developing a supportive organizational culture, promoting excellence, and setting high-

performance standards (Kim & Park, 2019). Meng and Berger (2020) stated that a supportive corporate culture was essential for high fiscal performance in a firm. de Waal and de Haas (2018) studied the effect of senior and executive leadership, showing a correlation between high-performance standards from leaders and successful organizational culture and high financial performance, but little focus was paid to the effect of middle and lower-level managers on organizational culture and its effect on fiscal performance. Meng and Berger noted that there was not enough clarity in the core practices and definitions of high-performance firms and the ways these firms connect to organizational culture. There have been few studies where researchers explored the role of middle and lower-level managers in effecting successful organizational culture and financial performance.

Problem and Purpose

Middle management with no input from leadership faces organizational leadership challenges when leading organizational culture change (Bak et al., 2022). Organizations fail 70% of the time when trying to change the organizational culture because of interference from management (Kennett-Hensel & Payne, 2019). The general business problem was that middle managers not conforming to the new culture and leading organizational culture change with their employees may result in their firms' declining financial performance. The specific business problem was that some middle managers lack effective strategies to lead organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies middle managers use to lead organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. The target population consisted of four middle managers of transportation firms located in Ohio with successful experience leading organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance in their organizations. The implications for positive social change include managers gaining a better understanding of the strategies used to lead organizational culture change to increase financial performance with concomitant reductions in employee stress. Senior managers could also use part of the increased profits to make socially responsible contributions to the local communities to benefit community members and their families.

Nature of the Study

I selected the qualitative research method for this study. Yin (2018) described qualitative research as a method to explore the what, why, and how of a phenomenon in its real-life setting. I used the qualitative method because I intended to explore what, why, and how of organizational culture change in its natural context. In a quantitative study, the researcher examines the relationship between various variables, using measuring techniques to analyze the data through hypothesis testing (Saunders et al., 2019). A researcher using the mixed-method approach collects and analyzes both qualitative and quantitative data (Rebs et al., 2020). I did not select the quantitative or mixed-methods approaches for this study because I did not examine relationships among variables using statistical analyses through hypotheses testing or specific data sets.

I considered ethnographic, phenomenological, and case study qualitative research designs for this study. I did not use the ethnographic research design because, according to Pearse (2021), researchers use this design to explore the cultural and social aspects of an organization or community, which was not the purpose of this study. The phenomenological design is an interpretive design a researcher uses to explore the lived experiences of participants related to a phenomenon (Klein & Milner, 2020). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because I did not focus on the lived experiences of participants related to a phenomenon. Researchers use the case study design to explore real-world business within the participants' environmental context (Mishra & Dey, 2021). Yin (2018) stated researchers use the case study design to explore what, why, and how of a phenomenon in its natural setting. I used case study design because I explored what, why, and how of a particular phenomenon, which was organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance.

Research Question

What are the effective strategies middle managers use to lead organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to successfully lead organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance?
2. How did your employees respond to the organizational culture change?
3. How were organizational culture change strategies communicated throughout the organizational ranks and among stakeholders?

4. What modifications did you apply to any strategy to improve its effectiveness in leading organizational culture change initiatives?
5. What policies and processes have you used to successfully lead organizational culture change initiatives?
6. What were the key barriers to implementing strategies to lead organizational culture change initiatives?
7. How did you overcome the key barriers to implementing strategies to lead organizational culture change initiatives?
8. What else would you like to add about strategies to lead organizational culture change initiatives?

Conceptual Framework

The transformational leadership theory formed the conceptual framework for this study. Burns (1978) introduced the concept of transformational leadership (Nielsen et al., 2019). Transformational leaders stimulate ideas and creativity from followers by creating a safe environment for sharing ideas to help challenge established norms, processes, and ideas (Hannah et al., 2020). Transformational leaders enhance the motivation, morale, and performance of followers through different methods and techniques, adapting as necessary to achieve culture change success (Hannah et al., 2020).

The interaction and communication between middle management and employees have a key role in obtaining acceptance from employees on organizational culture change (Bak et al., 2022). Middle managers must accept the change and be able to effectively communicate, motivate, and enforce the new culture to obtain complete organizational

culture change success (Bak et al., 2022). Culture change fails when middle managers adhere to old cultural norms or refuse to adapt to the new culture (Bak et al., 2022). Executives must use transformational leadership principles to influence middle managers (Hannah et al., 2020). Because middle managers and employees frequently interact with each other in the professional environment, middle managers could use transformational leadership to motivate employees in the new culture (Bak et al., 2022). In the current study, I focused on the strategies middle managers lack that influence organizational culture change success and the potentially toxic behavior that results from a lack of appropriate strategies, causing a potential negative financial impact.

Operational Definitions

Employee turnover: The rate (i.e., volume) at which employees withdraw from employment with a firm (Rebs et al., 2020).

Middle manager: Individuals who directly manage individual contributors or other managers at a firm and champion and initiate the firm's strategy processes (Rebs et al., 2020).

Motivators: The factors present in a firm that motivate employees and give the employees' job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959).

Organizational commitment: An employee's emotional attachment to a firm where the employee strongly identifies with a firm's organizational goals and desires to remain an employee (Bak et al., 2022).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are the preliminary beliefs that the researcher makes about their specific study (Yin, 2018). A study participant's knowledge is the primary concern of qualitative research (Yin, 2018). The first assumption I made was that participants in the study had sufficient knowledge and experience in organizational culture change success, the topic of this study. I also assumed that the study participants would make sufficient time to answer interview questions and participate in follow-up discussions. Another assumption was that the study participants would consent to the interviews being recorded since I planned to record and dictate the sessions. My final assumption was that participants would answer interview questions candidly and truthfully.

Limitations

Limitations are uncontrollable factors that might affect the quality and results of the research (Pathiranage et al., 2020). I noted two limitations to this study. The first limitation was that participants were part of the same industry, the transportation industry, which might cause similar opinions and views. I mitigated this limitation by choosing participants responsible for different business units with diverse professional, cultural, and experiential backgrounds. The second limitation was the potential bias and inaccurate recollection of culture change events by participants. I mitigated this by using several sources of data collection along with semistructured interviews as well as collecting documents, personal observations, and feedback on the interviews from participants.

Delimitations

Delimitations of research represent the boundaries of the study (Pathiranage et al., 2020). The four participants in this study included middle managers and line-level employees of two major logistics companies. I narrowed the scope of the study to two major logistics companies in Ohio. I screened each participant to ensure they had experience managing line-level employees with one of the two companies and had proven experience dealing with organizational culture change. By doing this screening, I guaranteed that each participant had taken part in several useful cases of managing a team that affected organizational culture.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

There is a connection between organizational performance and leadership's influence on organizational culture (Boyukaslan & Aşikoğlu, 2022). Positive actions and behavior by leadership result in employees feeling engaged, which directly affects the performance of an organization positively (Boyukaslan & Aşikoğlu, 2022). The existing body of knowledge was deficient in studies that focus on an organizational culture change framework that included components of organizational culture, events that influence organizational culture, and the culture change method used to achieve change success (see Boyukaslan & Aşikoğlu, 2022).

Organizational change and culture, or a business model restructure, often negatively affect the culture of an organization (Schein, 2020). Leaders must manage the consequences of change when employees feel threatened about job security that they

have no empowerment, reducing employees' job satisfaction (Piwowar-Sulej, 2021). An effective leader manages the negative effect of change; therefore, employees do not feel disempowered during the change process (Piwowar-Sulej, 2021). There was a need to address the deficiency of research on major organizational change and middle manager influence and provide a base framework for further research on successful organizational culture change (see Stoecker & Avila, 2021).

Implications for Social Change

The study's implications for positive social change include the potential to improve employee health, morale, and job satisfaction because of potential enhanced strategies for managers to reduce employee stress and anxiety when experiencing organizational culture change. Leaders who convey high emotional intelligence can create successful organizational culture change success through the ability to perceive their own emotions as well as their employees' (Mishra & Dey, 2021). Leaders with high emotional intelligence possess four key attributes: self-management and self-awareness, known as personal competence, and relationship management and social awareness, known as social competence (Klein & Milner, 2020).

The positive behaviors of middle managers demonstrate the achievement and self-actualization of corporate culture change (Klein & Milner, 2020). Middle managers who demonstrate positive behaviors towards employees during culture change are 85% more likely to obtain employee buy-in on the change initiative (Boyukaslan & Aşikoğlu, 2022). Employees buying in to organizational culture change have less stress and anxiety with the new culture, improving their morale, job satisfaction, and overall health (Boyukaslan

& Aşıkoğlu, 2022). Corporations often strive for corporate social responsibility through green initiatives, nonprofit support, donations, and other practices (Klein & Milner, 2020). Happy employees are 75% more likely to support corporate responsibility initiatives than unhappy employees (Farrukh et al., 2020). Managers may use the results of the current study to gain a better understanding of the strategies used to lead organizational culture change to increase their organizations' financial performance with concomitant reductions in employee stress. Senior managers could also use part of the increased profits to make socially responsible contributions to the local communities to benefit community members and their families.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this review of academic literature, I synthesized and analyzed existing literature on differing leadership styles, the foundation and layers of organizational culture, and financial performance. The review of existing literature includes a discussion of Burns's (1978) transformational leadership theory, which was the conceptual framework of this study. I also provide a review of contrasting theories, such as Graen's (1973) leadership-member exchange theory and Bass's (1985) transactional leadership theory. Additionally, different levels of organizational culture, organizational culture change methods, and financial performance of an organization are presented to show how leaders at different levels can affect performance.

Strategies for Searching the Literature

To conduct the literature review, I searched for dissertations; scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles; and other literature on the topic of the study in the following

databases: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Dissertation & Theses at Walden University, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest. I also used Google Scholar as a search engine. My research strategy consisted of selecting articles based on publication date, theory contribution or evidence related to the topic researched, and significance to the concepts studied. I used the following keyword search terms: *organizational culture, change management, culture, how to measure fiscal performance, middle managers, upper management leadership, leadership theories, toxic leadership, cost of toxic leadership, transformational leadership theory, situational theory, levels of culture, firm acquisition, employee job satisfaction, intrinsic job satisfaction, extrinsic job satisfaction, employee engagement, organizational sub-cultures, qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, research design, ethnographic, case-study, phenomenological, population, sampling, ethical research, data collection, data organization, reliability, validity, transferability, credibility, data saturation, and confirmability*. The search for material for the study resulted in 109 relevant sources, 85% of which were peer-reviewed, and 66% of which had publication dates between 2020 and 2024. The sources included in the study consisted of 93 peer-reviewed journal articles (85% of the total sources), 15 books (13%), two government websites (1%), and two dissertations (1%). There were 66 relevant sources included in the literature, 85% of which were peer-reviewed, and 74% of which had publication dates between 2020 and 2024. The sources included in the literature review consisted of 56 peer-reviewed journals (85% of the total sources in this section), nine books (14%), and one dissertation (1%).

Application to the Applied Business Problem

This study's findings can be of significant value to business leaders wanting to successfully implement organizational culture change and minimize employee turnover because of poorly implemented culture change initiatives. Leaders of organizational culture change attempt to maximize employee morale and employee performance by eliminating the negative aspects of the previous culture and increasing organizational financial performance (Rebs et al., 2020). Retaining talented employees is difficult for organizational leaders when the organizational culture is negative and toxic (Rebs et al., 2020). Business leaders with employees exhibiting high morale enjoy increased fiscal performance, increased employee satisfaction, and improved employee production, thereby creating lower employee turnover (Kennett-Hensel & Payne, 2019). Findings from the current study may contribute to existing knowledge regarding organizational culture change and increase managers' understanding of extrinsic and intrinsic factors that influence organizational fiscal performance.

Middle managers can have a significant effect on an organization because of their direct influence on employees. Middle managers without the proper organizational culture change leadership strategies can negatively influence employees and result in poor organizational fiscal performance (Rebs et al., 2020). Middle managers negatively influencing organizational culture change initiatives can lead to multiple employee issues, including low job satisfaction, decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, decreased morale, and increased turnover (Behery et al., 2019). Middle managers with poor organizational culture change leadership skills caused employee disengagement that

has resulted in \$450 billion to \$550 billion in lost revenue per year in the United States (Kennett-Hensel & Payne, 2019). Middle managers helping lead culture change through effective leadership can increase culture adoption and mitigate potential fiscal loss.

History of Leadership

Researchers have tried to understand the different styles and techniques in leadership and the way poor leadership strategies can negatively affect employee culture and change success. Leadership is a concept that has often been addressed in literature (Kim & Park, 2019). Leadership has no concise or clear definition or meaning that clarifies a leader's actions (Bass, 1985). The lack of definition and clarity and the history of the topic make leadership one of the most researched and least understood topics (Soderberg & Romney, 2022). A firm's organization is composed of a human hierarchy that is led by empowered leaders that combine to face business challenges (Nielsen et al., 2019). Researchers have attempted to understand the relationships between a person's choice in leadership style and effectiveness with cause and effect by applying categories to leadership, including traits, styles, and behaviors (Nielsen et al., 2019). Researchers have applied leadership categories to job satisfaction, but not all researchers have agreed on the content that composes each type (Martin et al., 2022).

Leadership is interpretive by both the leader and the employee, showing the way each employee reacts differently to varying leadership styles. Behavioral science researchers have suggested that leadership influences social and professional behavior based on one's understanding of leadership (Martin et al., 2022). Definitions of leadership have included over 75 dissimilar meanings that confuse leadership's

importance (Martin et al., 2022). The confusion of the meaning causes questioning on the concept of leadership. These researchers found that the basis of effective leadership included how leaders perceive employees' job performance and how employees perceive organizational goals and missions (Martin et al., 2022). Understanding leadership is interpretive based on one's experiences and perceptions and shows why leaders need to be adaptive. Understanding leadership support areas helps researchers to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a particular leadership approach.

Since the inception of leadership theories in the 1840s, researchers have identified several areas of leadership support (Kim & Park, 2019). The first leadership theory was the great man theory that states that only a man can be a great leader and was born a leader (Kim & Park, 2019). Some researchers disputed or ignored the concept that leaders are born and not made because there was no scientific characteristics or proof verifying this theory (Kim & Park, 2019). Researchers eventually agreed that some people were natural leaders, but it is possible to develop leadership skills (Kafetzopoulos et al., 2022). Stodgill (1948) created a list of skills and traits that show practical leadership approaches, including being adaptable, ambitious, cooperative, decisive, energetic, persistent, tolerant, responsible, conceptual, creative, and organized. Academics subsequently viewed Stodgill's list as inconclusive because of a lack of proof or ways to verify measurements effectively (Kim & Park, 2019). The inconclusive evidence caused researchers to consider other approaches or theories to leadership.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership theory is the framework I selected as the conceptual framework for this study because of the prevalence of the theory in modern business research. Transformational leaders are visible throughout the most successful corporations (Soderberg & Romney, 2022). House (1977) and Burns (1978) conducted foundational research on transformational leadership theory and created the idea that leaders can inspire employees or followers to achieve high performance.

Transformational leadership can be either explicit or implicit when measured using the same instruments that capture a leader's critical and essential behaviors (Bass, 1985).

Transformational leadership challenges traditional top-down leadership because transformational leaders do not dictate orders to their employees. Researchers must understand the components of transformational leadership to understand its influence on an organization and its fiscal performance.

The components of transformational leadership help researchers understand how the leader influences their employees and drives financial performance. Bass and Avolio (1994) summarized the components of transformational leadership with the four I's of leadership: inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Managers should have a vision of the future and help employees move forward toward that vision while assisting employees to achieve personal goals and drive organizational fiscal performance (Northouse, 2021). Managers who apply this leadership theory develop their employees into positive and optimistic employees who convey the leader's vision, strive towards organizational and team goals, and have high

job satisfaction while improving their fiscal performance (Nielsen et al., 2019). The influence of leaders can directly affect the performance of the employee and the organization (Northouse, 2021). Transformational leaders practice inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration to accomplish organizational goals (Northouse, 2021). No leadership style is perfect and applicable in every leadership situation (Nielsen et al., 2019).

Transformational leaders must account for several different aspects of leadership when making important decisions. Transformational leaders balance their focus between their employees' shared vision and their creative ambitions and processes (Soderberg & Romney, 2022). There are five transformational leadership steps, including challenging the process, enabling others to act, encouraging the heart, inspiring a shared vision, and modeling the way forward (Zbierowski, 2019). At all levels of an organization, managers should challenge their employees to replicate their manager's vision, values, confidence, self-efficacy, and the mission statement (Northouse, 2021). Transformational leaders cannot be afraid to challenge traditional management views or consult with all employees to make business decisions and improve their intrinsic motivators. The constructs of the original transformational leadership theory were not without problems.

Transformational leadership has weaknesses, problems, limitations, and shortcomings. Transformational leaders tend to be focused more on the big picture of an organization, focusing on grand ideas (Asencio & Sun, 2020). Leaders who apply transformational leadership as a universal leadership style can experience problems with being too focused on the success of the organization and causing employee burnout

(Asencio & Sun, 2020). Transformational leaders tend to focus intently on change and can cause disruption to normal business processes (Asencio & Sun, 2020).

Transformational leaders have a higher-than-normal likelihood of abuse of power because of their higher-than-normal charisma (Asencio & Sun, 2020). However, the transformational leadership style has many positive aspects that counter potential weaknesses.

The potential positive aspects of transformational leadership outweigh the problems of the leadership style. Bass (2000), Bass and Avolio (1994), Burns (1978), and House (1977) agreed on the many positive aspects of transformational leadership theory, including enhanced employee job satisfaction. One of the main positive aspects of transformational leadership are idealized attributes (Nassif et al., 2021). Transformational leaders exhibit positive attributes that are idealized and imitated by employees, creating desired organizational culture (Nassif et al., 2021). Understanding the role of idealized attributes in influencing employee job satisfaction may help researchers understand the affect leadership styles have on employee job satisfaction.

A transformational leader with idealized attributes, which are characteristics, qualities, or traits that significantly affect job satisfaction, displays confidence and power when reassuring others about a solution to a problem (Nassif et al., 2021).

Transformational leaders must be prepared to engage each employee's personality and utilize idealized attributes to help the effectiveness of leadership style choices (Den Hartog et al., 1999). Employees can better understand the proposed solution to a problem when a transformational leader leverages the correct idealized attribute (Nassif et al.,

2021). Employees' ideas of idealized attributes vary because of their diverse backgrounds and cultures, causing the need for adaptive leadership style choices. Transformational leaders must understand their personal and professional tendencies to help them be more effective in leadership.

The dynamic between a leader and their employee is an important aspect that helps researchers understand how each employee reacts to different leadership styles. According to Bass (2000), employees look for key traits in leaders, including honesty, empathy, consistency, communication, direction, conviction, and flexibility. Leaders' perceptions of employees are influenced by their employees' personality traits, whereas employees base their perception of a leader on professional and personal individual characteristics (Sehgal et al., 2021). Leaders with adaptable traits are more relatable to their employees and deemed more approachable and understanding (Layaman et al., 2021). Effective leadership is either contingent or universal, but never both, and each leader must choose which style best suits their attributes and employees (Layaman et al., 2021). Effective leaders influence employees by encouraging them to rise above their self-interest for the team or company's benefit, achieving milestones and applying vision and strategy (Layaman et al., 2021). A leader's personality traits directly influence team performance, effective leadership, and team cohesiveness (Layaman et al., 2021). A leader and the employees' relationship are vital for researchers to understand to correlate the link between leadership effectiveness in culture change success and fiscal performance.

Leaders combining transformational and situational styles address the limitations of only using transformational leadership by not adhering to only one style and using complementary styles to lead employees. Den Hartog et al. (1999) paired the transformational leadership theory with the situational theory to address vision broadness and burnout problems because both traditional and transformational leaders experience the same situations. Situational leadership theory is standard but is not always sustainable in today's business climate (Northouse, 2021). Managers displaying transformational and situational leadership recognize all aspects of a business problem, acknowledge all variables of the situation, and react to agile leadership's business problem (Matta & Van Dyne, 2020). Leaders overcome the weaknesses of an individual style by combining complementary and different styles. Transformational leadership was prevalent in many modern studies.

Several researchers have used transformational leadership theory as the backbone of their research. Nissinen et al. (2022) demonstrated the benefits of teaching transformational leadership in a military setting and showed increased job satisfaction and employee morale of members under the command of leaders that were trained in transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is teachable by interviewing employees before and after transformational leadership training (Nissinen et al., 2022). Transformational leadership is also important in a nontraditional business (i.e., military) (Nissinen et al., 2022).

The transformational leadership theory is often studied at the management level of an organization. Transformational leadership is important in the sales level of several

companies (Peesker et al., 2019). Peesker et al. (2019) used semistructured interviews to show sales leadership plays a connected role to sales performance. Peesker et al. noted improved sales performance with transformational leadership coaching from superiors and senior salespeople. Transformational leadership has a positive correlation to improved sales performance through mentors teaching idealized sales leadership behavior (Peesker et al., 2019). Transformational leadership can be used at all levels of an organization.

Transformational leadership is an important piece to all areas of an organization. Ahmad et al. (2022) expanded on previous research by studying the effect of transformational leadership on project managers and members of project teams and any correlation to project success. There was a positive correlation between project managers and project members who use transformational leadership and the success of their project (Ahmad et al., 2022). Ahmad et al. emphasized the use of self-leadership throughout the life cycle of the project. Ahmad et al. showed the potential effect of all project team members and ways even nonmanagers can influence the success of a project. It is important for all employees to consider their leadership style if they want a project to be successful. It was important for a researcher to understand other areas that leadership style can affect.

Leadership styles affect multiple areas of an employee in an organization. Messman et al. (2022) conducted a study on the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior in teachers. There was a positive correlation between transformational leadership by school management with teachers' need for

competence, autonomy, and innovation in the workplace (Messmen et al., 2022). Leaders that use transformational leadership positively motivate their employees by giving them individualized attention and encouragement to explore alternative options for problems (Messman et al., 2022). Innovation is a key area for modern firms and transformational leadership was shown to promote innovation. Understanding transformational leadership and the potential effect on organizational directives is important for employees to help mitigate potential risk.

Leadership style can affect the acceptance and impact of organizational initiatives. Peng et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of multiple studies to understand the effect of transformational leadership and the acceptance of organizational change. There was a positive correlation between an employee's commitment, openness, and readiness for the organizational change (Peng et al., 2021). Peng et al. also noted a negative correlation between transformational leadership and resistance and cynicism to change. There was a nonsignificant correlation between leadership style and support for the change (Peng et al., 2021). There is a significant potential effect a leader's leadership style on successful organizational change (Peng et al., 2021).

Leadership can influence employee productivity and job satisfaction. Hui-Ling (2019) conducted a study on the influence of transformational leadership on work outcomes through followers' leader identification and social identification. Transformational leadership positively affects collective efficacy and affective commitment (Hui-Ling, 2019). Hui-Ling also noted a direct correlation between transformational leadership and an employee's social identification. Leadership styles

affect employees' ability to achieve an organization's desired results (Hui-Ling, 2019). It is important for researchers to understand the effect of leadership style on employee engagement.

Leadership style can potentially affect employee engagement. Chua and Ayoko (2021) conducted a study to understand if there was a correlation between transformational leadership style and work engagement. Chua and Ayoko noted employees' perceptions of transformational leadership were positively related to employees' self-determined motivation, which are autonomous, intrinsic, and controlled, and work engagement (Chua & Ayoko, 2021). Self-determined autonomous and intrinsic motivation was positively linked with work engagement while controlled dimensions of self-determined intrinsic and autonomous motivation mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement (Chua & Ayoko, 2021). Leadership style affects work engagement, and transformational leadership style was viewed positively by employees (Chua & Ayoko, 2021).

Leaders must choose a leadership style that positively influences both individuals and groups of employees. Lorinkova and Perry (2019) conducted a study to understand the effect of individual-focused and group-focused aspects of transformational leadership. Lorinkova and Perry concluded that a leader using transformational leadership style must do so with both the individual employees and the larger groups to positively influence all employees. There was a need for a leader to use consistent leadership styles, regardless of the number of employees they are trying to influence (Lorinkova & Perry, 2019). Leadership styles can influence nonperformance related aspects of an organization.

Adoption of new technology can be greatly influenced by the leadership style chosen to communicate and teach the new technology. Weller et al. (2020) conducted a study to understand if transformational leadership will lead to acceptance of a new high performance work system. Weller et al. noted that transformational leadership is positively associated with acceptance of a new high performance work system and acceptance is negatively associated with business unit job satisfaction disbursement. Leadership style choices directly affect the acceptance of new software acceptance (Weller et al., 2020). Other leadership styles permeate modern organizations and were worthy of review because they were either complementary or in opposition to transformational leadership, such as transactional and situational leadership.

Transactional Leadership Theory

Understanding the differences between transformational and transactional leadership will allow a leader to appropriately adapt in different leadership situations. Transformational leadership was an opposing leadership theory that focuses on inspiring others to follow and requires a high degree of communication, coordination, and cooperation between leaders and employees (Barnett, 2019). Transactional leadership is based on control and processes and requires a strict management structure (Behery et al., 2019). Multiple leadership styles can lead to happy and productive leaders; however, determining the most effective styles for each leader's characteristics is vital.

Leaders displaying a balance of transformational and transactional leadership behavior in the appropriate situations contribute to productive and satisfied employees more likely to accept employee culture change (Barnett, 2019). Employees'

organizational commitment to their job shows in their level of job satisfaction and fulfillment (Behery et al., 2019). Transformational leaders use the transformational leadership style to increase their employees' acceptance of new culture change initiatives by raising their motivation toward social and organizational environments (Behery et al., 2019). The transformational leadership style was unique and optimizes employee development by encouraging development and maturity (Behery et al., 2019). High-performing employees have self-development and achievement and help build high performing organizations.

Transactional leadership, created simultaneously as a transformational leadership style, was an opposing leadership style that uses rewards to motivate employee performance (Bass, 1985). Transactional leadership helps leaders develop the foundational relationship between leaders and followers by motivating them with rewards (Bass, 1985). Burns (1978) observed three components of the transactional leadership style: contingent reward, award management, and passive/active management. Leaders that employ transactional leadership attempt to motivate their employees with a rewards system for positive performance and goal achievement instead of the personal influence used by transformational leaders (Burns, 1978). Leaders use the rewards methods as a negotiation for positive employee performance (Burns, 1978). Transactional leaders are fundamentally different from transformational leaders because of their methods to influence subordinates.

Transactional leaders use negotiation, via rewards, instead of personal influence to achieve culture change success (Behery et al., 2019). Transactional leaders use

interpersonal transactions via rewards and punishments to accomplish culture change success (Hannah et al., 2020). Transactional leaders influence through setting goals and motivating by promising rewards or contingency rewards to establish commitment from employees (Behery et al., 2019). Transactional leaders offer rewards and accolades in return for adherence to the new culture to achieve organizational goals of culture change.

Transactional and transformational leadership styles are the most noticeable leadership styles in the 21st century (Behery et al., 2019). Leaders may display both leadership types, but the transformational style was more effective than the transactional method (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). Leaders should be adaptable in their style choice and not rely solely on one style over another (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). No singular leadership style will work in all situations, and no leader should choose only one style to lead employees. It was important to review another leadership style to understand different approaches to culture change.

Situational Leadership Theory

Hersey and Blanchard (1993) developed the situational leadership theory, another opposing leadership theory, and stated that leaders must adapt their leadership style based on their employees' maturity and strength. Maturity and strength levels of leaders also influence their leadership style choice with different employees (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). Situational leadership style leaders adapt their leadership style to the situation and individual to maximize employee adherence to the desired outcome (Chapman, 2020). Leaders aware of their leadership style preferences can adapt efficiently and effectively to their employee's preferred leadership style (Chapman, 2020). Situational leadership style

encourages leaders to determine their employees' traits and capabilities and be flexible in choosing the leadership style that fits each employee to reach the desired outcome (Chapman, 2020). The quadrants of situational leadership include the way a leader adapts as needed.

The four quadrants of situational leadership help researchers understand the way a leader chooses a leadership style applicable to the desired outcome of a situation. There are four quadrants of leadership: telling or directing, coaching or selling, supporting or participating, and delegating (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). Directing or telling was when a leader micromanages with little emphasis on building a relationship with employees (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). Coaching or selling was when a leader sells the employee an idea and celebrates and praises employees when the employees finish the goal by focusing on task behaviors and relationships (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). Leaders share work and decision-making processes with the employees equally to support or participate (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). Leaders in the delegating quadrant delegate authority to employees while monitoring employees' progress (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). The four quadrants of situational leadership allow leaders to adapt their style as needed to accomplish a goal.

Organizational Culture

Researchers must understand the definition of organizational culture to examine the effect organizational culture has on financial success. Schein (2020) defined organizational culture as the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a specified organization or team culture from a human perspective. Employees in organizations or part of individual

teams contribute through their beliefs, values, and behaviors (Schein, 2020). Each team's culture varies dramatically, and each organization can have a varying culture that contributes to its overall culture requiring research on individual team culture (Schein, 2020).

Some researchers view organizational culture in the context of variables or metaphors to better understand the organizational culture concept. Hannah et al. (2020) defined culture differently from Schein (2020) by asking if the organization was a culture or has a culture. This question helps researchers break organizational culture into a variable (i.e., the organization has culture) or a metaphor (i.e., the organization is a culture). Researchers that use culture as a variable view culture as the values and behaviors of individuals that cause or influence other variables such as organizational outcome or performance (Hannah et al., 2020). This approach was problematic because the approach does not define the culture or what to change that creates a variable outcome. Researchers should then consider organizational culture from a metaphor perspective.

Researchers can consider the organizational culture as a metaphor to help focus their research on the influence the culture has on employees and the way their framework creates organizational culture. Laila et al. (2022) argued that making organizational culture into a variable that measures organizational performance creates potential risk because the variable fails to acknowledge the human side of culture and forces the concept of culture to become quantitative. Laila et al. also suggested connections between the effect human nature has on the culture as a variable on organizational performance.

The perspective of organizational culture as a metaphor with variables aligns with the constructivist framework and view of the world that suggests multiple interpretations of reality based on individuals' interpretation of their life experiences (Laila et al., 2022). Changing those individual perspectives with additional information or experiences constitutes culture change in an individual (Laila et al., 2022). The constructivist framework shows there were multiple ways to affect organizational culture change, and not every person reacts the same to different ways of trying to change organizational culture. The values and behaviors of an employee can affect the attempt at organizational culture change.

Schein's (2020) model of organizational culture is like Herman's iceberg model (Gosen & Mielly, 2021). Schein developed the model in the 1980s and discussed the complexity of various aspects of organizational culture. Schein divided the organization's culture into three levels of behaviors and artifacts, espoused values, and assumptions (Schein, 2020). Behaviors and artifacts, representing the first level, were visible, tangible, verbal, and overt elements within an organization, such as language, dress code, and office furniture (Schein, 2020). Behaviors and artifacts were visible but were difficult to decipher and interpret because they differ between organizations.

Espoused beliefs and values, the second level of Schein's (2020) model of organizational culture, were the behaviors that organizational leaders expect employees to perform in a situation. Managers within the organization communicate the behaviors expected of employees in the values and mission statements for the organization (Schein, 2020). Schein stated that managers should exercise caution because employees will recite

values and beliefs verbally but do not consistently demonstrate the values and beliefs in their actions. Managers must reinforce the expected behaviors of their employees to support the organizational values. Failure to reinforce the organizational mission by managers causes interruptions of the desired organizational culture.

Assumptions, the third level of Schein's (2020) model of organizational culture, are deeply rooted and unconscious thoughts or perceptions in an organization.

Assumptions are core pieces of organizational culture that are difficult to recognize because they are deeply rooted. Organizations provide advice on the actions of management based on assumptions but might differ in presentation depending upon noted subcultures. Schein suggested researchers should study an organization's culture at any of the three levels if they do not understand the organization's basic assumptions to help decipher them correctly. Possible misinterpretations or errors can occur when analyzing artifacts and values. Models of integrated circular rings emerged in the review of this framework that showed an understanding of the influence of different layers within a company's organizational culture.

Cooke and Rousseau (1988) proposed a ringed model demonstrating organizational culture as an integrated layered effect. Cooke and Rousseau's layers of culture are outer rings with visible signs of culture within an organization, including systems and processes. The inner ring layers of culture depict signs of organizational culture, such as assumptions and behaviors below the visible outer rings (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988). Researchers can view the outer layers of organizational culture because the layers are visible when using a structured non participatory approach. However,

researchers can only see the deep invisible layers of culture when utilizing observations, interviews, and employee involvement to ensure researchers understand the invisible layers, avoiding potential risk (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988). Cooke and Rousseau's model does not show the way the visible and invisible layers integrate within an organization's culture.

Cooke and Szumal (1993) used Cooke and Rousseau's organizational culture model to develop and refine the framework to show the integration of the visible and invisible layers of culture within an organization. Cook and Szumal developed the organizational culture index to focus on integrating visible and invisible layers of culture (Cooke & Szumal, 1993). Cook and Szumal attempted to reveal the behavioral norms and assumptions of a team, business unit, and organization to find actual employee behaviors that the employee feels are necessary for internal success within the organization. Cooke and Szumal defined this layer as "behaviors that organizational members believe are required of them in order to fit in and meet expectations within their given organization" (p. 1323). showed the invisible layers of culture within an organization are passive/defensive, aggressive/defensive, and constructive behavioral clusters.

Organizational leaders exhibiting dominant constructive behaviors hire employees, encourage them to interact with other employees, and take on projects and tasks that help them meet their higher-order satisfaction needs (Cooke & Szumal, 1993). The findings by Cook and Szumal are in alignment with high-performing employees' positive deviance behavior theory. Executive leaders exhibiting dominant passive/defensive cultures hire employees that will interact with people in a non-job-threatening manner. Executive

leaders exhibiting dominant aggressive/defensive cultures hire employees to handle tasks and projects aggressively to help protect the status and security of coworkers. Cook and Szumal described the expected observations by dividing the three behavioral clusters into 12 styles and studying employees in an organization that follow one of those three behavioral styles. Understanding the invisible layers of an organization's culture allows researchers to understand what makes up high-performance organizational cultures.

Leaders desiring to develop high-performance organizations need to develop organizational culture that will allow them to deal with strategic business trends while attracting high-performance employees (Dastmalchian et al., 2020). Organizations with a high-performance organizational culture display traits of effective collaboration, transparency, flexibility, and creativity (Bayhan & Korkmaz, 2021). Leaders promoting and demonstrating the traits of high-performance organizational cultures build supportive cultures where high-performing employees can grow and succeed (Bayhan & Korkmaz, 2021). Organizational leaders must carefully craft and foster their culture and subculture to maintain the organization's high performance.

Scholars have multiple definitions of a high-performance organizational culture. Dastmalchian et al. (2020) described a high-performance organizational culture as a culture that promotes integrity, trust, quality, risk-taking, and innovation. Thant and Chang (2021) described a high-performance culture as an effective way of fostering employee growth and happiness within an organization. Leaders displaying democratic team leadership via transformational leadership create a homogenous population via a

high-performance culture (Thant & Chang, 2021). The differentiating layers of culture and subculture contribute to a company's fiscal success or failure.

Leaders should not overlook the influence and impact of a high-performance organizational culture. Understanding, trusting, and supporting different cultures and subcultures in an organization was vital for the effectiveness of an organization (O'Neill & Salas, 2020). Psychological safety, trust, and a supportive risk-taking environment are essential elements for success in a high-performing organizational culture (O'Neill & Salas, 2020). Different business areas and individual groups may have contrasting cultures and subcultures, and leaders' support and understanding enable these groups to achieve high fiscal performance (O'Neill & Salas, 2020). Embracing the differences between teams and business areas can lead to high fiscal performance.

Different organizations benefit from different types of organizational cultures. Handy (2007) introduced four examples of different organizational cultures: person, power, task-related, and role. There is less emphasis on internal arrangement because the employee is the center of a person-based culture (Handy, 2007). The power-based culture emphasizes centralized decision-making and individualism (Handy, 2007). The efficiency and flexibility of human capital and resource utilization are principles of a task-related culture (Handy, 2007). A high-level bureaucratic structure with clear internal processes and definitions highlights the role culture (Handy, 2007). Hiršová et al. (2019) used contemporary differentiations for the same four types of organizational culture: (a) clan culture-internal relationship, tradition-based, and loyalty; (b) development culture, with a focus on innovation and entrepreneurship; (c) hierarchical culture, with reliance on

stability, internal control, and order; and (d) rational culture, with an emphasis on competitiveness, external environment, and goals setting. Leaders must identify the most applicable and desirable culture for their current and future business plans.

Leaders desiring to change organizational culture must adopt positive deviance behaviors to influence the new desired culture. Positive deviance was a positive variation from the accepted business norm (Bisel et al., 2020). In the organizational culture change process, positive deviance was a participative approach to organizational culture change centered around opportunity to change from existing organizational culture norms (Bisel et al., 2020). Positive deviance identifies leaders' positive deviance behaviors that create an effective constructive organizational culture. The resulting culture change can increase employee morale, job satisfaction, and organizational performance (Bisel et al., 2020).

Leaders exhibiting positive deviance identify specific positive deviance behaviors and try to replicate them throughout an organization where culture change was needed (Bisel et al., 2020). Positive-deviance leaders do not adhere to a unified process for successful culture change, allowing leaders to examine an organization's subculture and invisible layers and adapt behaviors differently as needed (Bisel et al., 2020). Middle managers have multiple spheres of influence, including downward to employees, upwards to management, and laterally to peers (Bisel et al., 2020). Positive deviance was different from traditional organizational culture change approaches because it explicitly and implicitly incorporates people to identify a solution, thus creating buy-in from all parties. The traditional organizational culture change approach excludes people when management identifies the culture problem and decides upon a change path (Bisel et al.,

2020). Positive deviance does not begin with the current organizational culture and does not assume there was a right answer from the beginning.

Leaders must understand the positive deviance process and correctly deploy the technique to influence organizational change. The positive deviance process has seven distinct steps (Bisel et al., 2020). The first step was having an invitation and agreement to the need for a change. A participative session occurs next to determine what the group wants to achieve. Change managers identify a group of positive deviant employees or groups through an inquiry process. Next, managers examine the chosen individuals further to identify the specific positive deviance behaviors uncommon with the average employee population. Managers design and implement a training program to teach middle managers to understand their current culture and behaviors. Positive deviance managers should then monitor and evaluate the training and increase resources if the desired culture change was not occurring (Bisel et al., 2020). Every organizational culture change initiative requires someone to influence and drive the change, encourage employees to become involved, listen to ideas, and build employee ownership of the change, leading to increased fiscal performance.

Leadership Styles and Organizational Culture

Leadership and organizational culture are closely linked and influence each other (Schein, 2020). Schein (2020) asserted that organizational culture affects leadership style. Arghode et al. (2022) stated that specific industry demands, practices, and environmental requirements were the basis of organizational culture and influence leadership approach. In the earliest stages of an organization, the personality of the leaders establishes the

foundational principles of the emerging organizational culture, while in a more mature phase, the culture will shape the leadership style and influence the choice in new leadership (Schein, 2020). Differing cultural foundations predicate differing leadership styles.

Different organizations have different culture foundations, causing leaders to adopt different leadership styles based on the cultural foundation. Avolio and Bass (2004) distinguished three leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and situational. Arghode et al. (2022) discussed the differences between transformational and transactional leadership by stating that inspirational and charismatic leaders show how transactional leaders manage transactions that presumably maintain the existing status quo by engaging, coaching, and driving continuous change for the better. Few cultures can coexist simultaneously; however, different situations and circumstances may require a differing leadership style (Harrison et al., 2020). Culture foundations should not be a crutch to keeping to one leadership style. An organization that wishes to innovate and adapt must constantly analyze its culture and adopt leadership styles as needed to avoid performance deficiency.

Management and leadership cause performance deficiency even though symptoms might belong to either environmental flow or employee behavior (Harrison et al., 2020). Organizational culture change was one solution to addressing performance deficiency; however, it was not easy to change culture when leadership values and norms do not support the change (Lin & Huang, 2021). Lin and Huang (2021) found that performance support can effectively change culture, but not when significant organizational culture

change was required. Organizations in which managers promote transparency in decision making and purpose; openness to diverse opinions and views, and demonstration of the values through visible action obtain high employee engagement and better fiscal performance (Bayhan & Korkmaz, 2021). Understanding the cause of performance deficiency helps a leader decide if organizational culture change will positively affect fiscal performance.

Financial Performance

The performance of an organization is the ability of a firm to achieve the desired outcomes of the firm (Flink & Chen, 2021). Organizations often use financial performance to define organizational performance, particularly in publicly traded or for-profit organizations. Ogbeibu et al. (2020) studied the performance of an organization from factors outside of financial performance, including service quality, employee job satisfaction, and customer satisfaction. In addition, researchers found a significant positive correlation between positive organizational culture, employee job satisfaction, and fiscal performance (Ogbeibu et al., 2020). Ogbeibu et al. found a strong connection between sales growth, employee turnover, higher levels of employee commitment, and higher product quality with positive organizational culture. Boyukaslan and Aşıkoğlu (2022) determined that satisfied employees have more creative, flexible, and open thinking. An organization's culture was the result of good and bad behaviors internally in a company (Boyukaslan & Aşıkoğlu, 2022).

Kiziloglu (2022) researched 1,348 firms in North America to understand what degree organizational culture differences matter and how they affect performance. Only

16% of executives surveyed believed their firm's culture was where it should be, and 92% acknowledged that their firm value would increase with an improvement in organizational cultural norms (Kiziloglu, 2022). The lack of effective organizational culture was a primary cause of poor productivity and performance in modern business (Behery et al., 2019). Kiziloglu defined effective organizational culture as a culture that promotes behaviors needed to successfully execute a firm's values, mission, and goals, creating a competitive advantage. Leaders who display effective leadership styles create nontoxic and productive workers.

Researchers categorize behavior as toxic and nontoxic, which significantly influences employee job satisfaction. Thirty percent of failures of an organization result from toxic leadership and behavior of employees (Ma & Liu, 2019). Ma and Liu (2019) found a positive correlation between constructive leadership styles and positive organizational fiscal performance, along with a correlation between toxic behaviors and negative organizational fiscal performance. Therefore, an organization needs to increase employee culture and job satisfaction to bolster financial performance.

Organizations that exhibit high performance have leaders who successfully influence a positive culture and raise employees' job satisfaction (Van Dam et al., 2021). A leader who can influence culture in an organization uses constructive leadership behaviors to create high-level relationships with coworkers and employees. The most financially successful organizations have leaders that consistently create cultures and environments that promote organizational growth and performance (Van Dam et al., 2021). An executive's behavior and leadership style influence employees' attitudes and

job satisfaction (Van Dam et al., 2021). An effective leader adapts leadership style through different strategies and methods based on the culture or subculture they influence (Van Dam et al., 2021). Effective leaders create peer buy-in, increase managerial support, increase organizational performance, and improve employee job satisfaction (Van Dam et al., 2021). Leaders must maintain multiple spheres of influence with subordinates and superiors to enhance culture in an organization. Employees feel disengaged and exhibit toxic behavior in traditional top-down management structures.

Multiple researchers studied modern leadership styles, organizational culture, and positive fiscal performance. A review of the literature that explored leadership style and organizational culture revealed that transformational leadership and productive organizational culture aligned with positive fiscal performance (Gupta et al., 2020; Harrison et al., 2020; Mouta & Meneses, 2021; Tan & Xia, 2022). Firm goal achievement is a widely accepted indicator of company performance and, therefore, leadership and organizational culture effectiveness (Mouta & Meneses, 2021). Company financial performance provided an additional framework to track organizational fiscal performance that included firm goal achievement as a metric (Reimann, 1975). Therefore, I used interview questions to explore leadership style effectiveness, organizational culture, and organizational financial performance and gather subjective performance measures of firm performance.

Organizational culture and executive leadership styles directly affect organizational financial performance (Gupta et al., 2020). Gupta et al. (2020) measured executive leadership styles using a five-factor model and compared it to a 3-year average

of return on assets to measure firm performance. CEO leadership style positively related to organizational culture and increased fiscal performance (Gupta et al., 2020). CEOs with a high transformational leadership style were more likely to encourage high employee performance through cooperation, interaction, and collaboration within their team, which led to increased company return on assets (Gupta et al., 2020). Gupta et al. did not show a correlation between organizational culture change success and financial performance.

One of the most prominent challenges leaders face when striving for financial performance after an organizational culture change is mediocrity. Mediocrity in financial performance is when members of a firm lack the ambition to be the best (Louca et al., 2020). Louca et al. (2020) expressed concern for firms that promote equality, fairness, and egalitarianism because dependence on those ideals promotes mediocrity, thus diminishing positive financial performance. Yoo et al. (2021) stated that excellence in business gets replaced by mediocrity because leaders stop paying attention to what matters most in driving financial performance. Understanding what mediocrity is in business will help leaders avoid potential dips in financial performance when mediocrity occurs.

Mediocrity is a situation where average-performing employees decide what to do with high-performing employees (Louca et al., 2020). Middle managers are the bureaucratic, change-opposing layer of organizational culture (Goldstein, 2022). Hybholt et al. (2022) discussed the role of middle managers in strategic processes in an organization, concluding that leadership's perception that middle managers are the basis

of the status quo shows the obliviousness of executive leadership. The expectations of middle managers by executive leadership and how the two groups relate are interconnected. Executive leadership that expects mediocre performance from middle managers and sets up corresponding low expectations are likely to be reduced, reinforcing the low expectations of executives (Hybholt et al., 2022). Middle managers demonstrate mediocrity in organizational culture change due to the low expectations of executive leadership (Hybholt et al., 2022). Manzoni and Barsoux (2002) described this circle as a vicious cycle of perceived incompetence. Mediocrity drives a lack of fiscal performance and may cause executive leadership to consider organizational culture change.

Malhotra et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the leadership style of CEOs related to culture change success. Malhotra et al. assessed unscripted text from 2,381 CEOs of Standard & Poor's 1,500 companies to demonstrate that leadership style influenced the success and frequency of organizational culture change during a merger or acquisition. Malhotra et al. theorized that decisive thinking, social engagement, and collaborative behavior led to more significant culture changes during acquisitions and mergers. This study does not include any potential effect of middle managers on successful culture changes during an acquisition, showing that further study was needed.

Transition

In Section 1, I laid the foundation of the study, identified the business issue, and determined the applicable research question. In the literature review, I provided details on the major leadership theories, organizational culture, and firm fiscal performance. As part

of the review, I presented each topic with historical and modern views. Section 2 will consist of the role of the researcher, population and sampling, data collection, organization, and analysis, summarized by a discussion on validity and reliability. In Section 3, I will present the findings and discuss the possible business applications of the findings, the applications to the professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, and personal reflections.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I restate the study's purpose before discussing the researcher's role, participants, design and method of the study, population and sampling, ethical aspects of the research project, data collection and analysis processes, data techniques, and means used to assure the study's reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore effective strategies middle managers use to implement organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. The target population consisted of four middle managers of transportation firms located in Columbus, Ohio with successful experience in effecting organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. The implications for positive social change include reducing employee stress and improving financial performance. Senior managers could use part of the of the increased profits to make socially responsible contributions to the local communities to benefit community members and their families.

Role of the Researcher

Understanding the role of a qualitative researcher helps the researcher to remain impartial and without bias. A researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative research (Pearse, 2021). A qualitative researcher should ask pertinent questions and actively listen to a participant's answers (Yin, 2018). Researchers should comprehend the study questions' context and adjust to any new directions presented by a participant's interview answers (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) also stressed the importance of a

researcher being self-aware to help avoid any potential personal bias while collecting and analyzing qualitative data through proper qualitative research design and approved methods. Understanding and adapting to data presented by the participants was vital for me to help prevent bias.

Yin (2018) emphasized the necessity for the researcher to always remain receptive to different ideas and opinions to alleviate potential researcher bias. I stayed open to opposing ideas and views from participants. I protected quality and a conducted fair and consistent interview process across all participants through use of a predefined interview protocol. Qualitative interview protocols allow respondents to share information in their own words and are useful for gathering detailed information and understanding respondent answers (Boardman et al., 2022). I steered the interview process with open-ended questions that helped me to obtain more comprehensive responses from all participants. During the follow-up member checking process, I sent my interpretations of the interview transcriptions to the participants and had them verify my interpretations. I made further adjustments based on feedback from participants.

Understanding the researcher's professional background will help eliminate potential bias in the research. I have advanced my career in the transportation industry, possessing a litany of low-level management positions in both accounting and information technology sections of the same company for 24 years. The company I worked for was bought and sold four times throughout those 24 years, most recently sold in 2014. The four participants, middle managers from transportation companies in the United States, were from firms with which I had no personal or working relationships.

The biases of a researcher are a natural result of familiarity with the phenomenon, the topic under review, or the participants' experiences (Moosa, 2019). Data observations are subject to the researcher's own bias and interpretation (Moosa, 2019). I only conducted interviews with middle managers from transportation companies in the United States and from firms that I had no personal or working relationship with to avoid any influence or bias in my observations. I performed member checking with each participant by sending my interpretations of the interview transcriptions to the participants and had them verify the accuracy of such interpretations. I made further adjustments based on feedback from participants. Software was used to transcribe each interview, and I reviewed each transcription against the audio recording to verify its accuracy.

I adhered to the ethical principles discussed in *The Belmont Report*, which were respect for people, welfare, and justice (see National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). *The Belmont Report* includes the recognition of respect for people by emphasizing voluntary participation and giving adequate information about the study to participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Participation in the current study was entirely voluntary. The principle of beneficence consists of requiring that people be treated in an ethical manner and protecting them from harm while maximizing potential benefits and minimizing potential harm (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Justice, which promotes equitable representation in research in terms of fairly distributing the benefits and risks of the research, is the third principle (National

Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I also adhered to *The Belmont Report's* principles of respect for people, welfare, and justice by discussing my role as the researcher and the nature of the study as well as reassuring the participants that I would protect and maintain confidentiality over the course of the study before obtaining informed consent from each participant. I submitted an application to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for a research and ethics review and was granted approval to conduct this study before any data were collected.

Interviews are one of the most common methods researchers use to acquire information about a specific research topic. An interview protocol is one of the ways to conduct interviews (see Appendix A). An interview protocol is a script of the specific things a researcher will say during the interviews (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). The interview protocol serves as a qualitative research process guide to gather data by conducting interviews (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). Researchers interact with subject-matter experts through interviews to collect information on the given research phenomenon (Moosa, 2019). I used an interview protocol to serve as an interview guide in the study to determine the strategies participants used in supporting and effecting organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance.

Participants

Researchers conducting a qualitative study attempt to understand a phenomenon using the participants' descriptions and experiences in a real-world context (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). Researchers should choose participants based on their study's focus to

meet the goal of the study and answer the research questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2020). I selected four participants with characteristics that aligned with the study's central research question. Participants were the at the middle-manager level of high-performance teams who led organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. I invited four middle managers within two transportation companies, representing the following three different business units: operations, accounting, and human resources. Individuals wishing to be eligible to participate in a qualitative study must completely understand the phenomenon under investigation (Moser & Korstjens, 2020). I provided the participants with a basic overview of what a qualitative study entails with scholarly articles as support.

Researchers select participants who have subject matter experience or expertise with the phenomenon under investigation. Alzahrani et al. (2019) suggested selecting participants with prior expertise in the studied phenomenon to participate in a study. Alzahrani et al. recommended using multiple methods of recruitment, including professional networking sites, to find potential candidates. I used professional job websites, such as Glassdoor and LinkedIn, to find potential candidates. I reached out to each potential participants via the business contact email address on their LinkedIn contact page or any listed mobile phone numbers and then had an introductory phone conversation with them.

It is vital for qualitative researchers to gain proper access to and establish working relationships with study participants. Du et al. (2020) suggested that researchers provide guarantees to participants that no harm will come from participating in the study,

communicate the worthiness of the study, and suggest how the study may benefit the participant or their organization. I verbalized a guarantee of confidentiality to participants and the worthiness and benefits of the study. Du et al. also recommended gaining trust early in the process by building rapport with each participant; assuring respondents of complete confidentiality; explaining nonmaterial benefits they will gain by participating; and explaining the material benefits, if any, from participating. I built a relationship with participants by gaining their trust, ensuring confidentiality, and explaining nonmaterial benefits of the study.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Saunders et al. (2019) identified the three methods available for social research as qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. A researcher who uses the qualitative method explores the phenomenon to understand meanings or experiences (Köhler et al., 2022), uses open-ended questions to gather descriptive data (Yin, 2018), and provides a level of description that shows the context and dynamics of the phenomenon (Du et al., 2020). Saunders et al. noted that researchers apply the qualitative research method in many fields, including administration, sociology, education, and social work. Myers (2019) stated that qualitative research has an essential role in management and business studies. I selected the qualitative methodology to understand the meanings and experiences behind the phenomenon of strategies middle managers use to support organizational culture change initiatives to increase financial performance.

Zyphur and Pierides (2020) stated that quantitative researchers try to reflect on objective measures of reality by using closed-ended questions to gather quantifiable data. Quantitative researchers test their hypothesis by comparing variables before and after the test and analyzing gathered data (Lenger, 2019). When comparing qualitative and quantitative methods, Mishra and Dey (2021) argued that elements of attitudes and emotions are undesirable in quantitative research but valuable and essential in qualitative research. I used the four participants' answers to my interview questions to address the research question because I was not testing a hypothesis. The research question was about strategies middle managers use to support organizational culture change initiatives to increase financial performance; therefore, the quantitative method was not appropriate.

Mixed-methods research is an extension of quantitative or qualitative research (Frias & Popovich, 2020). Using the mixed-method research approach enables positive enhancement of the research topic by combining the detailed view of the studied phenomenon from a participant's view and the measurable relationship between variables (Frias & Popovich, 2020). I was not examining any measurable variables; instead, I focused on qualitative insights into a phenomenon. Therefore, mixed-methods research was not a suitable option because I did not need a quantitative element.

Research Design

I considered three different research designs for this study: case study, phenomenology, and ethnography. Use of the case study design in social science research allows for in-depth exploration (Yin, 2018). In a case study, researchers attempt to understand complex issues within a real-life context (Mishra & Dey, 2021). The case

study design is a detailed description of a phenomenon and an appropriate way for researchers to explore the cultural influence on groups or individuals (Lenger, 2019). The research question of the current study was focused on determining the strategies middle managers use to support and effect organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. I conducted an in-depth exploration of this complex issue and attempted to understand the organizational culture's influence on a group, making the case study design the appropriate choice.

Phenomenological researchers try to explain how a participant understands the meaning of their experiences with a phenomenon (Towers et al., 2020). Pearse (2021) stated that the phenomenological design is appropriate when exploring the lived experiences of a participant. I focused on solving the business problems by identifying and exploring strategies, not individuals' understanding of their lived experiences; therefore, I did not select a phenomenological design.

Lenger (2019) stated that in an ethnography, researchers study a particular cultural or social group and try to understand the culture of that group. According to Mishra and Dey (2021), researchers using the ethnographic design need to be attentive to both the larger study event and the mundane details of the study to capture all aspects of the cultural influence of the group studied. An ethnography can be extremely labor intensive and take multiple months or years to complete (Mishra & Dey, 2021). I focused on a business organizational culture, not a social culture; therefore, I did not select the ethnographic design.

Researchers reach data saturation when new pieces of data no longer represent new information (Mwita, 2022). It is important for researchers to obtain data saturation to help validate their findings (Mwita, 2022). Mwita (2022) suggested four to six interviews to reach data saturation in a qualitative study. A qualitative researcher should strive toward the quantity and quality of the data rather than for a higher number of participants (Mwita, 2022). Qualitative researchers maintain data consistency by posing the same question to each study participant (Hughes et al., 2020; Lenger, 2019). I reached data saturation after conducting interviews with four participants after which no new relevant information was presented by participants.

Population and Sampling

The participants in this study were middle managers working in transportation companies that recently experienced organizational culture change. Hughes et al. (2020) stated that researchers using the qualitative method should focus on the richness and quality of the data from their study; therefore, they need to set rigid population selection criteria. Understanding the effect of middle managers on organizational culture change success and firm fiscal performance required selecting the right population to sample. The participants were four middle managers from two public, global transportation companies that have led organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. I continued to interview participants until no new meaningful information or themes emerged from their responses.

Yang and Zhang (2022) asserted that purposeful sampling is a deliberate process where researchers pick participants based on specific qualities. I ensured the richness and

relevance of the data by using the purposive sampling strategy. Mwita (2022) stated that a research sample is adequate when the sample reaches proper data saturation and pertains to the phenomenon under research. The current study participants were a purposively selected group of four middle managers who had successfully supported and effected organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance.

Hughes et al. (2020) studied the possibility of sufficient saturation and richness of information with a small number of interviews, finding that a small number of participants who were subject experts could provide enough information for sufficient data saturation. I selected participants based upon consideration of their expertise and experience with the topic under study, position in the business unit in each company, and ability to provide comprehensive information. The experts I selected as participants for this study were able to give the breadth and depth of their experience, ensuring complete and rich data from their interview responses. Hughes et al. stated that the interview process should begin with adequate preparation by the researcher in locating an appropriate setting that allows participants to be as comfortable as possible while eliminating distractions. I conducted Zoom meetings at a convenient time for the participants to allow them a flexible location and at a mutually agreed time.

Ethical Research

The value of the information the researcher collects, and the researcher's ethical conduct determines the quality of the doctoral study (Kunz et al., 2020). The researcher's honesty, integrity, and transparency are the most important factors of an ethical study and

support assuring the reliability of the study through establishing participants' trust (Kunz et al., 2020). Research readers should be able to trust that researchers conducted the study with ethics and integrity and that the results of the study are reliable (Ellis, 2020). It is the responsibility of the researcher to conduct the study in an ethical manner (Ellis, 2020). I conducted the semistructured interviews with the participants with integrity and transparency. I established the participants' trust by explaining the research process and informing participants that any identifying information would be changed to protect their anonymity.

Ellis (2020) stated informed consent is an important aspect in an ethical research study. The main principle of informed consent for a researcher is to inform all study participants of all areas of the given research study (Ellis, 2020). Hughes et al. (2020) stated that a researcher should clarify the study's objective, the researcher's identity, the role of the participants, and how the study results will be used to all research participants. Informed consent also means participants exercise their rights to voluntarily agree or refuse to participate in the study (Ellis, 2020). Researchers must explain in the informed consent form (see Appendix A) that participants can withdraw from the study at any point without consequences and how the researcher will protect the participants (Hughes et al., 2020). The consent form should also include the researchers' contact information, describe any potential risks involved in the research, and any potential benefits to participants (Hughes et al., 2020). I explained informed consent to all participants and ensured they understood all aspects of the research and how I would use their responses. I

also ensured the participants understood that any identifying information would be changed to protect them and their organizations.

It is the responsibility of the researcher to store the information collected from participants in a safe and secure place to keep the confidentiality and privacy of the study participants (Kunz et al., 2020). Using random codes to identify study participants is one way to securely store data, instead of using personally identifiable information like a name (Kunz et al., 2020). The researcher can limit access to the random participant codes to further protect their identity (Kunz et al., 2020). I used codes in this study to identify the participants. I stored the information in my password-protected computer that will be backed up in cloud storage. I will store this data securely for 5 years to protect participant confidentiality, and then destroy the data thereafter. I assured participants that I will keep their names, and any company names they mention in interviews, confidential.

Kunz et al. (2020) stated that researchers can offer remuneration to participants when necessary to help increase their willingness to participate in the study. Kunz et al. stated that researchers should not offer remunerations to participants if they want the most unbiased responses. Kunz et al. stated that compensation may assist in recruiting participants, but a researcher should follow a basic set of guidelines in offering compensation. Researchers are required to discuss compensation with participants, the researchers should not emphasize compensation on recruitment advertisements (Kunz et al., 2020). Researchers can offer cash or other means of compensation (i.e. gift cards) but should be cognizant of the amount so as not to require recipients to use their own cash to use it (Kunz et al., 2020). Compensation should be pro-rated based on amount of time

spent participating in the study (Kunz et al., 2020). I did not offer any incentives to participants to avoid influencing their responses.

Yin (2018) stated that a researcher has an ethical obligation to preserve the welfare of the human participants when conducting research. I conducted my research after receiving the Walden University IRB's approval (Approval No. 05-31-23-0626906). The IRB approval confirms that my research meets Walden University's IRB ethical protection standards. I provided the participants with an informed consent form via personal email. An informed consent document must contain the subject and purpose of the research, associated benefits and risks, compliance, terms of withdrawal, and voluntary participation (Kunz et al., 2020). I emailed an informed consent form to the potential participants that included the subject and purpose of the research, associated benefits and risks, compliance, terms of withdrawal, and voluntary participation. Kunz et al. (2020) stated that participants should be able to withdraw from a study at any time and without reason. A participant could have withdrawn from my study at any moment by providing me with a phone, email, or verbal notice; however, no participant withdrew from this study. The informed consent provided transparency of my research and protection for each participant.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher in a qualitative study is the primary data collection instrument (Yin, 2018). I was the primary data collection instrument for this study. Interviews and organizational document reviews are two of qualitative researchers' most frequently used data collection methods (Moser & Korstjens, 2020). I used in-depth semistructured

interviews as the primary data collection method. I conducted the interviews in a private and recorded Zoom call. The semistructured interviews lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes, including a base of eight open-ended questions (see Appendix B) and allowed for probing questions from me and detailed responses from the participants.

The reliability and validity of the study were assured through triangulation. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods of data sources in qualitative research to develop an extensive understanding of the phenomenon (Mwita, 2022). I also reviewed each company's public financial reports for the periods each participant experienced organizational culture change. Researchers should use methodological triangulation to ensure the thickness and richness of data (Mwita, 2022). A researcher can use data to replicate a study when the data are thick and full. I used data from the following sources to conduct methodological triangulation: semistructured interviews and document reviews. Using methodological triangulation, I confirmed a noted immediate increase in fiscal performance following successful culture changes where executives involved middle managers early in the change process.

An interview is a highly efficient and critical way of collecting data (Mishra & Dey, 2021). I used an interview protocol to ensure efficiency (see Appendix A) structure, and a uniform approach to each participant. Qualitative researchers who use semistructured interviews engage participants in follow-up interviews to ensure the accuracy, depth, and validity of the previously collected data (Williams et al., 2020). Member checking is when researchers provide study participants with researchers' interpretations of participants' answers to interview questions and ask participants to

validate the accuracy of such interpretations (Mwita, 2022). I recorded and then transcribed each interview and provided my interpretations of the transcripts to the participants for review and approval.

Data Collection Technique

Qualitative researchers seek to recognize and understand patterns in materials that depict problems in life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Yin (2018) discussed several data collection techniques a researcher can use to increase the validity and reliability of their study. I collected data using semistructured interviews and financial documents reviews. Semistructured interviews can be flexible as the interviews are a dialogue between the researcher and the participant (Lenger, 2019). For example, the question order may change from interview to interview based on the flow of the conversation (Lenger, 2019). Researchers using semistructured interviews can probe the participants answers to obtain additional depth and information from the conversations to help answer the research question (Lenger, 2019). Researchers using a review of organizational documentation and artifacts use the documentation to triangulate participant answers to interview questions (Lenger, 2019).

There are many advantages and disadvantages of semistructured interviews. Moser and Korstjens (2020) stated the advantages of interviews are the flexibility in timing and location afforded to both the interviewers and participants, better response rates than surveys, and the interviewer can control the order of the questions and can judge the spontaneity of the participant. I used Zoom interviews and flexible times and followed the interview protocol. Through Zoom, I was able to more easily record and

transcribe each interview. The ease of Zoom meetings and open timing allowed me to get better participation in the interviews. Moser and Korstjens stated the disadvantages of interviews are interviews can be time consuming, cause biases from the respondent, and are not anonymous. I mitigated these disadvantages by working in interviews for times when participants were free, triangulating participant answers with organizational documentation, conducting member checking, and using fictional names in place of actual participant names to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Reviewing organizational documentation is one method researchers use to verify interview responses. Organizational documentation and artifacts review is when researchers use the documentation to triangulate participant answers to interview questions to help eliminate bias (Lenger, 2019). The advantages of organizational documentation include that documents are good supplementation to interviews, documentation is not biased in relation to interview questions, and documentation can provide background information on a given subject (Lenger, 2019). The disadvantages of organizational documentation include that organizational documentation is not created with educational research in mind, documentation may not provide all information needed for a research study, the potential for bias by the developer of the documentation, and the potential for bias by the researcher when reviewing organizational documentation (Lenger, 2019). I used organizational documentation to triangulate the data from interviews as an independent data source.

I employed an interview protocol (see Appendix A) for the Zoom interview sessions. I recorded the sessions and took notes. I performed member checking with each

participant by sending my interpretations of transcriptions to the participants and had them verify the accuracy of my interpretations. I made further adjustments based on feedback from participants. The interview protocol served as a procedural guide that included a script of what I would say before and after the interview questions and the actual interview questions, as recommended by Pearse (2021). I used transcribing software to transcribe each interview and reviewed each transcription against the audio recording to verify accuracy. I made any needed adjustments and sent my interpretations of transcriptions to the participants and had them verify the accuracy of my interpretations. I made further adjustments based on feedback from participants.

Data Organization Technique

Researchers should organize the information they collect and keep an excellent account of their data (Pathiranage et al., 2020). Researchers should label and organize it in a way they can access it easily as needed (Pathiranage et al., 2020). I managed and organized my research data in Microsoft Word and Excel. I used Microsoft Word to transcribe each interview into text. I then used Microsoft Excel to place key points and themes into codes in each cell to help organize the main points of the interview.

Reflective journaling is a process of taking notes on insights and reflections during each interview (Pathiranage et al., 2020). I used reflective journaling during my interviews to note observations on main themes to allow for preliminary coding. Preliminary coding assists in identifying key points and themes from the interviews (Pathiranage et al., 2020). Researchers should ensure they know what data they have collected, such as interviews, interview notes, and participant follow-ups (Pearse, 2021). I will keep all

interview transcriptions, notes, and participant follow-ups for 5 years on a password-protected drive on my password-protected personal computer.

Data Analysis

Researchers obtain deeper and new understandings from case study research by analyzing and comparing different interpretations (Yin, 2018). Data analysis is the process of answering a researcher's question (Castleberry & Nolen, 2019). Researchers attempt to understand research data by consolidating the data and interpreting the participants' responses from interviews in qualitative research (Vova-Chatzi et al., 2020). Zilber and Meyer (2022) asserted that a study's findings will come from a researcher's understanding of the data. Research study findings constitute descriptive themes, accounts, or theories that explain the data (Zilber & Meyer, 2022).

I used methodological triangulation to compare data and test validity by using multiple data sources. Triangulation means cross-checking data sources to validate and corroborate the information obtained from the interviews and the review of organizational documentation (Castleberry & Nolen, 2019). Triangulation is when a researcher cross-checks all data sources to validate and corroborate information collected (Pearse, 2021). Pearse (2021) stated triangulation is an important way that a researcher can increase the credibility of the study. I used methodological triangulation by reviewing organizational documentation to validate and corroborate the information that was provided by the interview participants.

Researchers can address the research question by detecting and evaluating data via thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2019). It is the objective of a researcher to

find patterns evident in data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2019). I used thematic analysis to examine the data and identify key themes. The process of thematic analysis involves the researcher being knowledgeable of the data and finding patterns after conducting coding (Pearse, 2021). Thematic analysis also included naming and defining themes and making connections among the themes after developing the themes (Pearse, 2021). I looked for connections between firm fiscal data and the empirical research results. I used the coding methods introduced by Saldana (2021) and Microsoft Excel and Word to organize codes and identify themes in data. I focused on any key themes identified from the interview questions and which correlated with academic literature.

Researchers can gain insights to help answer research questions from semistructured interviews (Vova-Chatzi et al., 2020). I used semistructured interviews via video, organizational documentation, thematic analysis, and triangulation to gain insight into strategies middle managers use to lead organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. I conducted semistructured interviews by asking eight open-ended questions through a virtual Zoom platform. I recorded the interviews, transcribed the interview data, and wrote my interpretation of the transcripts for each interview. I then performed member checking after each interview.

I conducted data analysis on the recorded Zoom interview and organizational documentation to triangulate and validate my findings. I used an inductive approach to analyze data by coding and categorizing to identify emerging themes. According to Bingham (2023), researchers can organize similarly coded data into different categories and the outcome of coding are different themes that help a researcher to formulate a

conclusion. The five stages of coding included: precoding, first-cycle coding, after-first-cycle coding, second-cycle coding, and after-second-cycle coding (Bingham, 2023).

According to Bingham (2023), the five coding stages help researchers to organize data and categorize to reveal themes in qualitative research. I followed the five coding steps to formulate my conclusions. I read my interpretation of interview transcripts and highlighted passages for analysis to perform precoding. I also performed member checking as part of step one to ensure accuracy. I used NVivo coding to perform first-cycle coding by extracting specific words used by participants and placing them in quotes to differentiate them from other codes. I used these codes to find similarities and differences. I reviewed the member-checked data and used values coding techniques by coding phrases that reflected the participant's attitudes, values, and beliefs to perform after the first cycle coding. I reanalyzed data using the focused coding technique by identifying frequent codes and categorizing the data to perform second cycle coding. I identified principal themes by transforming the final categories into longer phrased themes to perform after second-cycle coding. I used code weaving techniques by combining fragments of the most frequent patterns and themes into a narrative.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability is the degree an assessment tool produces consistent and correct results (Mwita, 2022). The reliability of research is the ability of researchers to reach the same results if other researchers repeat the study (Vova-Chatzi et al., 2020). The concept of reliability implies trackable variability, meaning researchers can attribute variability to

identify data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher can use dependable measures in the study to ensure reliability (Vova-Chatzi et al., 2020). Dependability refers to the assurance that the results of a study center on the data the researcher collected (Vova-Chatzi et al., 2020). I used methodological triangulation and member checking to assure dependability and reliability. Methodological triangulation is the process of finding multiple sources of data to discard or confirm the findings in a study (Mwita, 2022). I used methodological triangulation by comparing data collected from conducting semistructured interviews with data collected from reviewing organizational documentation and determined that data alignment had occurred. Member checking is when a researcher sends their interpretations of verified transcriptions to the participants and has them verify the accuracy of such interpretations. The researchers then make further adjustments based on feedback from participants (Mwita, 2022). I performed member checking with each participant by sharing my interpretations of their responses during the interview and asked them to verify the accuracy of my interpretations. As needed, I adjusted my previous interpretations based on their feedback.

Validity

Qualitative research requires accuracy and credibility. Qualitative research validity is a quality or degree of representation of the study's phenomenon (Vova-Chatzi et al., 2020). Yin (2018) stated that researchers can use supporting evidence from multiple sources as a tactic to increase validity in case study research. I assured the study's credibility through clearly defining and following the research process and by my participant selection criteria. The accuracy of the report is made credible by how I

recorded, stored, and transcribed the interviews and through member checking post interview. I also addressed accuracy of this study through reflective journaling during interviews, Zoom recordings of the interviews, and member checking post interview.

Researchers can demonstrate validity through transferability, credibility, data saturation, and confirmability (Mwita, 2022). I used member checking and methodological triangulation to assure validity and credibility of the research. Confirmability is the amount of neutrality in the research study and that it is based on participant responses and not the researchers (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). Transferability is the extent the findings in the study can be used in other situations (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). I used member checking and methodological triangulation to ensure confirmability and enable determinations of transferability. Data saturation is when a researcher interviews enough respondents to encounter the same themes with no differences even with more interviews (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). I interviewed respondents until I reached proper data saturation. I reached data saturation when I no longer uncovered new themes after four interviews.

Transition and Summary

The objective of Section 2 was to provide a detailed description of the research process. In Section 2, I provided a description of the participants, the role of the researcher, and the sampling techniques. I also described my selected data collection methods of open-ended interview questions, how I assured the study adhered to ethical research principles, and concluded by discussing how the study's reliability and validity were assured.

I will begin Section 3 with an overview of my research and a brief presentation of my findings. I will discuss the application to business practice and consider the implication of social change. I will conclude Section 3 with recommendations for actions and for future research, a reflection of the study, a summary, and a conclusion of the study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

Through employing a multiple case study design, I identified and explored effective strategies middle managers use to support and implement organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. In this section, I classify the findings into the components of Burns's (1978) transformational leadership theory that was selected as the conceptual framework for this study. Three major themes emerged: (a) participation in organizational culture change strategies and plans, (b) creating clear communication channels, and (c) identifying and addressing key risks and barriers to culture change. These themes align with the conceptual framework of transformational leadership theory and other research to improve organizational performance. Because building a desired and positive organizational culture is part of an organization's fiscal performance, this study's findings support the theory that middle managers' support can affect fiscal performance during an organizational culture change. My recommendations were based on the themes uncovered during participant interviews and a review of external company financial information.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question for this study was: What are the effective strategies middle managers use to support and implement organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance? From the analyzed data, three major themes emerged: (a) participating in organizational culture change strategies and plans, (b) creating clear communication channels, and (c) identifying and addressing key risks

and barriers to culture change. The conceptual framework selected for this study was transformational leadership theory, originally created by Burns (1978) and focused on the idea that middle managers' support influences organizational culture change success, affecting financial performance (see Boyukaslan & Aşikoğlu, 2022). Based on both the literature reviewed and the emergent themes from the current study, middle managers can find effective strategies to support and implement organizational culture change initiatives that improve financial performance.

Theme 1: Participating in Organizational Culture Change Strategies and Plans

All four participants agreed that an organization's culture was an essential part of their individual team's daily work activities and interaction with other groups of the organization. Every participant also acknowledged their responsibility in promoting the desired new organizational culture during the change and that failure to promote and communicate the desired new culture could impact employee performance and, thus, the financial performance of the company. The four participants confirmed Boyukaslan and Aşikoğlu's (2022) conclusion that middle managers influence organizational culture change success. Participants also supported Kim and Park's (2019) beliefs that poor or no strategies to convey the new organizational culture can lead to the failure of the change and a decrease of fiscal performance. Within the data collected, I noted one subtopic that appears to have a direct correlation between a successful organizational culture change and increased financial performance: predetermined strategies and plans for implementing organizational culture change.

Middle managers who successfully implement organizational culture change are given predetermined strategies and plans for implementing the change. For example, middle managers who were given a plan on how to communicate and display the new culture have an easier time communicating, displaying, and enforcing the new culture (Bisel et al., 2020). Positive organizational culture improves employees' happiness and positively correlates to fiscal performance (Yue et al., 2021).

All four participants agreed that it was essential for executive leadership to create documented strategies for implementing the organizational culture change. Interestingly, all four participants and some correlating publicly available financials (i.e., ED1-ED5) expressed how improving culture improved fiscal performance. P1 and P4, along with ED2, ED4, and ED5, showed a notable improvement in company financials for the year following an organizational culture change. There was a 12% increase in earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization (EBITDA) growth year-over-year for the company that changed their company culture. Standard transportation industry growth for that time period was around 5%. Each participant noted they only had loose guidelines for conveying the change and that other teams received the message differently, depending on their leaders' communication style. P4 noted experience with one successful organizational culture change initiative when there was sufficient guidance from upper management to lower managers prior to the change rollout. All four participants stated how purposeful communication both directly between their team and with each individual team member was effective in conveying the cultural change. For example, P2 and P3 indicated that they communicated the corporate culture change to the

whole team and followed up individually on multiple occasions to reinforce each employee's understanding.

As discussed previously in the discussion of the transformational leadership theory conceptual framework, Hannah et al. (2020) explained how transformational leaders enhance the followers' motivation, morale, and performance through different methods and techniques, adapting as necessary to achieve culture change success. Middle managers must accept the change and effectively communicate, motivate, and enforce the new culture to achieve complete organizational culture change success (Bak et al., 2022). In a review of the collected data, I noted that all four middle managers understood the desired organizational culture change outcome from executives but rarely had information beyond the desired outcome and a loose communication plan. Middle managers were often left to communicate with their teams, with a general idea of the new organizational culture and general communications the executive team would send out.

P1, P2, and P3 discussed contrasting experiences with successful and unsuccessful organizational culture changes. P1, P2, and P3 mentioned how middle management teams were left to create their own roll-out strategies, plans, and processes. P3 commented that they "had no direct measurables or goals to work with when communicating the new organizational culture initiative or guidelines for ensuring that my team understood the corporate culture desired." P3 added,

Culture change is scary to many people and having a unified and thought-out plan on how to communicate the change and ensure the employees understand the change would be a tremendous help. Many of the culture changes I have been a

part of in my 30 years failed because each manager was left to communicate the desired culture to their team with no direction. People are different and convey and receive information differently. Some middle managers were more effective than others at conveying the desired culture. I experienced successful culture change in one role at another company where we were given a strategy from upper management, and we were allowed to ask our questions prior to it going to the general employees.

All four respondents mentioned similar circumstances and having been provided with little formal means on how they should communicate culture change when experiencing culture change failure. All four participants recognized different internal cultures between departments and teams and noted the way they communicate to their team was likely different than how other groups communicate the same culture change vision. P2 noted,

Culture change is a huge change and often a shock to employees that creates fear of losing their jobs. I wish there was a concerted effort from upper management to mitigate this worry as it does have an impact on performance. I was part of one change at [company name omitted] that was successful and seemed to go smoothly. All middle managers were involved early and prior to communicating with the individual employees. The change was dramatically smoother as middle managers were able to get on the same page and ask their questions.

In reviewing ED2, I also noted that an initial decrease of 8% EBITDA during the first 2 months after a culture change but a marked increase in performance following the first 2 months of 15% year-over-year. The percentage increase of EBITDA growth year-

over-year was not because of organic growth. I validated typical industry growth of other transportation companies of similar sizes and only accounted for roughly 4% of the EBITDA growth. The growth was also slow building, gaining roughly 4% per quarter for the year after the culture change.

Scholars have explained the possible negative consequences of departmental differences and the lack of a unified culture change strategy (Dastmalchian et al., 2020). Dastmalchian et al. (2020) stated that departments and individual teams can only understand culture change if the message is unified and consistent. Using the transformational leadership style provides leaders with tools to convey messages, but those tools do not consider individual and departmental differences. Managers who recognize the differences in both their teams and their departments have an opportunity to prevent and/or mitigate some of the risks involved with organizational culture change. Each of the four participants stressed the importance of having a thorough plan for communicating and implementing organizational culture change initiatives.

Theme 2: Creating Clear Communication Channels

All four participants stressed the importance of clearly communicating cultural change to all levels of an organization. Every participant noted the importance of a unified communication plan between executives and lower management. The four participants confirmed the findings by Yue et al. (2021) that internal communication among managers affects an employee's internal identification with an organization. P1, P3, and P4 echoed Bisel et al.'s (2020) assertion that it was easier for managers to convey

the desired cultural outcomes when they have plans to communicate to their employees clearly.

Within the data collected, I noted four subtopics that appear to have a direct correlation between clear communication and successful organizational culture change: (a) establishing transparent overcommunication to all levels of an organization, (b) communicating predetermined strategies up and down the management hierarchy, (c) enabling employees to communicate with all levels of management, (d) focusing on communication with important team members via feedback loops.

Establishing Transparent Overcommunication to all Levels of an Organization

All four participants noted that transparent overcommunication via a communication plan was vital for all levels of management to ensure the organizational culture change was understood. All four participants expressed how important transparent communication was between all levels of managers. All four participants also said that whenever upper management gave them clear directives to communicate the culture change to their teams, the culture change was successful. P3 stated,

I received the culture change roll-out directive about a day before I had to communicate it to my team. It was frustrating because I had questions that I knew my team would ask, and there was no time or room to ask these questions. It would have been nice to have a town hall or something for just the managers so that we could ask our questions. It would have allowed us to better prepare for the concerns our teams had. Other changes I have been a part of at different jobs that were successful allowed managers plenty of time to anticipate and address

potential issues or concerns. I also received a thorough communication deck from executives at one successful culture change that helps immensely in communicating with my team.

All four participants noted the importance of transparency within the communication of organizational culture change. P1 stated,

Executives like to get caught up in the ra-ra part of any change, but that is not necessarily very transparent. I was part of a culture change where there was a great deal of fear of something as simple as changing the company culture. I wish executives would have been transparent immediately with everyone and told the whole organization that there were no planned firings. I was part of one company who changed their executive team entirely and there was amazing communication from the new team. They addressed the change immediately, encouraged questions at all levels, and immediately communicated what the change meant to each team. It made the changeover seamless.

Upfront and transparent communication from management can assuage employees' fears about an organizational culture change.

In reviewing ED4, I noted that an initial decrease of 2% EBITDA during the first 2 months after a culture change for the successful company described by P1 but a marked increase in performance following the first 2 months of 10% year-over-year. I validated typical industry growth of other transportation companies by comparing income statements and balance sheets of similarly sized, publicly traded transportation companies

and only accounted for roughly 4% of the annual EBITDA growth. The growth was also slow building, gaining roughly 2% per quarter for the year after the culture change.

Goldstein (2022) stated that middle managers should always demonstrate and require transparency when communicating up and down the organizational chart. Hannah et al. (2020) discussed the importance of transparency in transformational leadership and how employees know when a leader is transparent. Transparency is essential in transformational leadership but is only sometimes possible in specific culture change initiatives (Hannah et al., 2020). Therefore, I concluded that executives should communicate with middle managers before rolling out organizational culture change initiatives.

Communicating Predetermined Strategies Up and Down the Management Hierarchy

P2 and P4 felt strongly that executives must involve middle managers in an organizational culture change before rolling it out to all employees. P2 and P4 noted that executives do not always involve middle managers or allow them questions before the culture changes. P2 stated,

I had zero clue a [culture] change was coming until about a day before the email to the whole organization. There was an email sent out to managers and above with a general FAQ slide. I had a day to mentally consume that message and try to prepare for my team's concerns. It was incredibly frustrating! The more time I have to prepare the better. I can help a culture change be successful with my team when I have time to prepare. I have had time at other jobs to prepare, and it makes the process much easier.

P4 shared,

I was almost as blindsided by the change as my employees. It's so aggravating trying to answer valid questions from my team with no prep time. A day or less is not enough time for something this significant. I wish executives had some sort of meeting with the prior management staff and allowed us an open forum to ask questions. I really think many of the concerns would have been addressed there. I feel like the lack of communication between the management team prior caused a ton of unnecessary fear and uncertainty for everyone. Changes at other companies have been much easier for me when I have open communication with my leadership team. I want to promote their change properly and need to be able to communicate openly with upper management to do so.

In reviewing ED1, I noted an initial increase of 1% EBITDA during the first 2 months after a culture change but a marked increase in performance following the first 2 months of 9% year-over-year. The percentage increase of EBITDA growth year-over-year was not because of organic growth. I validated typical industry growth of other transportation companies by comparing income statements and balance sheets of similarly sized companies and only accounted for roughly 4% of the EBITDA growth. The growth was also fast building, gaining roughly 3% per quarter for the year after the culture change.

All four participants expressed that communication of the change plan throughout all levels of management before employee rollout was one of the most critical steps in rolling out successful organizational culture change. All four participants recognized the

risks of leaving middle managers to communicate the culture change without thorough guidance on how to perform the change management. P1 stated,

I rarely received anything beyond basic guidance for culture from upper management in one change. Each manager was left to disseminate the corporate message as they saw fit. This led to pockets of acceptance across the company rather than large scale acceptance.

P2 explained,

Having messages from C-level executives is nice, but it does not always resonate to the common workers. Having open communication within the management levels prior to rollout to the various teams would have helped with conformity and a unified message from management. I was involved in one successful culture change in my career, and middle managers were involved prior to roll out to the general population. A company culture change at one of my previous roles was done without middle management involvement and was a disaster.

P4 had been through one successful organizational culture change in their career and noted some direction from upper management on the change process and how to mitigate risk. When I reviewed ED3, I found 11% EBITDA growth year-over-year immediately after the culture change. The growth rate was 6% above standard transportation industry growth of 5% for the same period. P4 stated, "I went through one successful culture change in my career at [company omitted]. There was communication from executives prior to rollout. This did give us time to plan for questions and potential issues and helped us in communicating."

Middle managers who communicate and interact with their employees play a vital role in obtaining employees' acceptance of organizational culture change (Bak et al., 2022). Bisel et al. (2020) explained that middle managers who communicate corporate messages and directives with clear communication plans avoid accidentally causing change failure due to an inconsistent message across the organization. Reviewing the collected data from interviews, company income statements, and balance sheets led me to conclude that there were rarely complete change management and communication plans given to middle managers before change rollout to their teams. I noted from the interview data that most managers achieved personal buy-in to the change when they could ask questions before disseminating it to their teams.

All four interviewees noted the need for complete change management and communication plans before the rollout of the culture change. All four participants noted that in successful culture change experiences there were communication plans from executive management. P3 discussed how, saying,

It was completely ambiguous in one failed culture change to communicate the culture change to my employees. Each middle manager communicated to their teams differently and it was much easier to communicate when I was given a communication plan. It helped get rid of the ambiguity and resulted in a successful culture change at one of my roles.

P2 described the rollout of culture change as:

Chaotic at best at one company I worked for. There was a ton of disillusionment and fear among the staff. I was part of a similar change at a different company

where it went rather smoothly. Middle management was engaged early and given a clear communication plan and allowed to ask our own questions prior to giving to our teams.

I noted in reviewing ED3 an 11% EBITDA growth year-over-year immediately after the culture change. The growth rate was 6% above standard transportation industry growth of 5% for the same period. The growth was also slow building, gaining roughly 2% per quarter for the year after the culture change. I concluded that using transformational leadership under a predetermined clear communication plan could greatly benefit the rollout of a new organizational culture.

In the transformational leadership conceptual framework, Bak et al. (2022) discussed how middle managers can use transformational leadership to motivate and enforce the new culture during a change. Hannah et al. (2020) noted that executives must use transformational leadership with middle managers first to display and enforce the new culture with middle managers before rollout to employees. The participants' responses and associated documents identified the importance of executives developing a communication and change management plan with middle managers before its deployment. Senior and middle managers' alignment for providing clear directives on how to communicate with employees enables middle manager to clearly communicate, display, and enforce the culture change with their employees.

Goldstein (2022) suggested that change missions are often lost at the manager level when there was no pre-communication among management teams. Hannah et al. (2020) stressed the importance of a unified message between all levels of management

during an organizational culture change. I found that middle managers want to present a unified vision to the staff but need time to ask questions and prepare for staff concerns.

Peng et al. (2021) noted that transformational leadership involves transparent communication throughout all levels of the leadership chain and that executives should allow for communication among management teams before any initiative. Sehgal et al. (2021) stressed the importance of middle managers understanding the executive directive before communicating to the teams. I concluded that executives who allow open communication and time for middle managers to ask questions before an organizational culture change rollout have the greatest chance of success.

Enabling Employees to Communicate With All Levels of Management

Participants noted the importance of executives enabling communication from employees to all levels of management without repercussion. P1, P2, and P3 noted that they experienced successful culture change when executives had a direct communication method. P1 stated, “I was part of changes at another job where the executive team took time to meet with the group as a whole and each individual team and department. The executives encouraged open and honest communication from all employee levels.”

P3 asserted,

They had department-level town halls at [company omitted] but it was always frowned upon for people to ask executives any questions. You could always feel an angry eye from senior managers when an employee did. The conversations were rarely productive. I worked for one company that experienced successful culture change and employees of all levels were encouraged to talk to every level

of management. It was not uncommon to stop into the CFO's office and chat casually. This openness was refreshing and helped alleviate change fears.

P2 stated:

In my department at one job any employee that asked an executive a direct question would get called into the controller office and get a lecture about chain of command. I never understood that. It seemed counterproductive to the culture change they were trying to initiate. I was not upset when the controller left the company and a new executive came in. That executive encouraged communication and even went out multiple times a week and walked the floor and just talked with individuals in the department. They were very approachable and well liked. Change under that executive was much easier to handle.

I also noted that in reviewing ED2 an initial decrease of 8% EBITDA during the first 2 months after a culture change, but a marked increase in performance following the first 2 months of 15% year-over-year. The percentage increase of EBITDA growth year-over-year was not because of organic growth. I validated typical industry growth of other transportation companies by comparing income statements and balance sheets of similarly sized companies and only accounted for roughly 4% of the EBITDA growth. The growth was also slow building, gaining roughly 4% per quarter for the year after the culture change.

Asencio and Sun (2020) stated that employees will only trust any change by executives if they can openly communicate concerns. Ogbeibu et al. (2020) noted that a diverse and inclusive organization allows open communication between all levels of

employees without repercussions. I found that all managers should allow and enable communication between line-level employees and executives to help the successful adoption of organizational culture change. I concluded that middle managers should encourage open communication between employees and all levels of management.

Bak et al. (2022) noted that transformational leadership-focused executives encourage and facilitate communication with all stakeholders during an organizational culture change. Bak et al. also noted the importance of transformational leaders communicating with employees in a way that allows open communication without repercussions. Allowing employees to communicate openly with all levels of management will help increase culture change acceptance.

Focusing on Communication With Important Team Members via Feedback Loops

Participants noted the necessity and benefits of focused communications with essential team members via feedback loops. P3 and P4 stated that peers hold certain members of every team in high esteem, and getting their buy-in to a culture change was necessary to help spread acceptance to other team members. P3 stated,

I had a few members of my team that everyone liked and respected. I made it a direct point to have one-on-one conversations with these people to answer any questions they had. I figured they likely talked with peers and were echoing some of their concerns.

P4 discussed feedback loops stating,

I always set up a feedback loop up and down two levels of the organization for influential employees. I made sure they could talk directly to two levels of

management above me and two levels of employees below them. This allowed some very honest and candid conversations about culture change and promoted acceptance. I often had to fight with my superiors to get them to accept that communication from that low on the totem pole, but it really helps acceptance.

I noted in ED2, ED4, and ED5 a notable improvement in company financials for the year following an organizational culture change in the company mentioned by P4. There was a 12% increase in EBITDA growth year-over-year for the company that changed company culture. Standard transportation industry growth for that period was around 5%.

Ahmad et al. (2022) discussed the importance of empowering and enabling essential employees by allowing accessible communication. Bisel et al. (2020) discussed organizational communication and allowing communication above a direct manager. From data analysis, I found that creating a feedback loop between specific and essential employees will improve organizational culture change acceptance. I found that middle managers who facilitate a feedback loop up and down two levels of an organization chart improve employee trust in a significant culture change.

Chua and Ayoko (2021) stated that transformational leaders encourage communication without restrictions to all employees to help create empowered employees. Chua and Ayoko noted the importance of empowering and enabling employees during organizational change and that enabled employees are generally more accepting of change. Participants noted that feedback loops between employees two levels below and managers two levels above helped organizational culture change adoption.

Theme 3: Identifying and Addressing Key Risks and Barriers to Culture Change

P1, P3, and P4 echoed the importance of identifying and addressing potential risks and barriers to an organizational culture change initiative. All four participants noted the importance of identifying these potential risks and barriers as early as possible in implementing a new organizational culture. All four participants also mentioned the need for a risk mitigation plan before rollout to the employees. P1, P3, and P4 confirmed the findings by Harrison et al. (2020) that risk mitigation was vital for a successful organizational change. All four participants echoed Rebs et al.'s (2020) assertion that early identification of risks and barriers is critical to mitigating or eliminating those risks. With the data analyzed, I noted two subtopics that the participants' comments reflected for addressing risk mitigation and successful organizational culture change: identifying risks and critical barriers early and creating risk and mitigation plans.

Identifying Risks and Critical Barriers Early

All four participants echoed that identifying risks and barriers to organizational culture change should happen before sending the message to the general employees. P2 and P4 said that when risks and barriers to culture change were identified between executives and middle managers before rollout, the culture change was very successful. All four participants expressed the desire for executives to identify risk and communicate with middle management before the change to give them time to ask questions. All four participants noted they could help executives with potential risks and barriers if given time to ask questions. P4 noted,

I was given time to prepare for a change at one job before I rolled out to the employees. It was much easier to communicate and plan for questions or risks since I was given time to prepare, I felt much more confident and comfortable answering tough questions as I had already thought through most things they asked.

I reviewed the transportation company financial statements (ED2, ED4, and ED5) of the company mentioned by P4 and noted a significant improvement year-over-year after the organizational culture change. There was a 12% increase in EBITDA growth year-over-year for the company that changed company culture. Standard transportation industry growth for that period was around 5%.

Messmann et al. (2022) stated that transformational leaders promote risk mitigation and facilitate discussions with employees. Lorinkova and Perry (2019) noted that proactive communication among the management team helps eliminate most potential risks and barriers to change. I discovered in my analysis of data collected that middle managers should be involved in risk identification and mitigation before rollout to employees. Involving the entire management team before rollout allows management teams to discuss most likely employee concerns.

Creating Risk and Mitigation Plans

I noted in my analysis of data collected the importance of risk mitigation plans and involvement by middle management for the selected organizations. All four participants noted their positive experiences in culture change where they were involved in risk planning. All four participants noted the importance of mitigating risks and

identifying barriers to organizational culture change before sending the initiative to all employees. All four participants echoed the sentiment that all employees have concerns with significant change, and middle managers often have the same concerns as employees. All four participants noted the need for preemptive risk identification and planning on how to answer questions. P1 stated,

I really wish executives would think about how to identify risks early when changing cultures. They could have come to me or others at my level and discussed and we could have given them most of the concerns that we ended up having to address. They simply wanted to change and expected all lower managers to handle the questions. That is so unfair. I have been a part of changes at other jobs where we had full-on risk planning sessions with senior leadership prior to the change communication. In my opinion this allowed the whole change to go smoothly as we had answers to most of their questions up front. It also encouraged communication up and down the org chart.

P2 shared similar concerns with their experiences with risk mitigation, stating,

Everyone has questions and concerns with a major company change. I wish we could've sat in a room [as middle managers] with executives and had an open and honest communication session. It would have made answering questions from our employees much easier as we likely already asked the same to executives. Change was much easier at other companies when all management teams communicated how to address issues or questions.

All four participants expressed that for successful culture change, executives should plan for any challenges to organizational culture change by conducting risk mitigation planning. P3 and P4 noted that executives and middle managers in several of their previous organizations often did not discuss potential risks, as had been done by their current employers that had successful culture change initiatives. P3 asserted,

It seemed like executives assumed people would just buy into the culture change. We never received any guidance on how to mitigate any risks we may encounter in one job. I had a better experience at my present employer where risk mitigation was planned between middle managers and executives.

P4 explained,

Executives would often communicate the culture change in large company town halls where questions were monitored and filtered through a moderator. Any concerns expressed by employees were glossed over and I had to try and answer the employee concerns the best I could. I have never once had anyone beyond my director try to answer some of the concerns directly. The successful organizational changes I had been a part of at other companies all had risk mitigation plans in place and attempted to anticipate employee questions prior to roll out. Morale problems persisted despite my best efforts in one change. I lost a few people during the first few months. I also noted a dip in performance from my team while they adjusted. It would have been nice if upper management put in some sort of plan or way to help us navigate the natural concerns of the employees. Later in

my career I was part of a successful change where we planned out answers to what we thought would be common questions. It went much smoother at that job. I concluded that before discussing with the entire employee base, developing and implementing a risk analysis and mitigation plan with middle managers could help leaders navigate employee concerns and potential employee turnover.

I also noted that in reviewing ED2 an initial decrease of 8% EBITDA during the first 2 months after a culture change, but a marked increase in performance following the first 2 months of 15% year-over-year for the company mentioned by P4. The percentage increase of EBITDA growth year-over-year was not because of organic growth. I validated typical industry growth of other transportation companies of similar sizes and only accounted for roughly 4% of the EBITDA growth. The growth was also slow building, gaining roughly 4% per quarter for the year after the culture change.

Laila et al. (2022) concluded that executive managers often underestimate the effect human nature has on organizational culture. Harrison et al. (2020) stressed the importance of executives considering potential risks in culture change and mitigating any potential significant risks. I noted from the interview data that executives rarely formulate mitigation and risk avoidance plans with middle managers during a culture change. I found that all four participants felt that building mitigation plans with executives would ease the apprehension of employees during a culture change.

Each of the four interviewees noted the need for risk mitigation plans from executives with organizational culture change. For example, P1 noted,

I never received any rollout plans from my executive team. I was told about the change prior to the entire employee base, but there was no communication or questions between middle managers and executives, just a directive. I have seen organizational changes at other jobs be successful when they planned for potential risk prior to communicating.

I concluded that planning out answers to potential hard questions and any other risks by executives would assist middle managers in deploying culture change.

In the conceptual framework of transformational leadership, Harrison et al. (2020) discussed how executives should always consider the risks of a change when communicating change within an organization. Dastmalchian et al. (2020) stated that all levels of management are responsible for risk mitigation, but it should always start with executives.

Applications to Professional Practice

Middle managers who use strategies to lead organizational culture change initiatives have an increased likelihood of change success. I found in this study that middle managers with predetermined strategies for communication and risk mitigation, open communication with all levels of management, and feedback loops with employees and executives have demonstrated success in promoting organizational culture change. Analysis of data led to the emerging themes of participating in organizational culture change strategies and plans, creating clear communication channels, and identifying and addressing key risks and barriers to culture change. The subthemes of participation in organizational culture change strategies and plans included creating predetermined

strategies and plans for implementing organizational culture change. The subthemes of creating clear communication channels included establishing transparent over communication to all levels of the organization, communication of predetermined strategies up and down the management hierarchy, enabling communication by employees at all levels of management, and focusing on communication with important team members via feedback loops. The subthemes of management identifying and addressing key risks and barriers to culture change included managers identifying risks and critical barriers early and management creating risk and mitigation plans. Each theme and subtheme are applicable in multiple professional settings, and if used, management could see improved acceptance of organizational culture change.

In the theme of participating in organizational culture change strategies and plans, preplanning the change between executives and middle managers was the most viable way of ensuring the adoption of culture change by employees. All participants stressed how executives should communicate a predetermined culture change plan to middle managers before rollout to employees. I concluded that middle managers have a greater chance of success with organizational culture change when they have predetermined strategies from executives for communicating the change to employees.

Within the subthemes of participating in organizational culture change strategies and plans, the findings revealed that executives who make a clear predetermined culture change plan for middle managers and plan for potential risks before giving it to all employees have a more significant chance of change success. Participants recognized the time required to create a culture change plan; however, they countered by noting the

importance for middle managers' inclusion in the prerollout stages and help with risk mitigation strategies.

In the theme of creating clear communication channels, management creating communication channels through all levels of an organization via feedback loops was the essential method for ensuring the success of organizational culture change. All four participants stressed the need for open communication without restriction for all employees. The four participants echoed the need for lower-level employees to be enabled to communicate questions and concerns with executives without repercussion. The findings were that middle managers who allow freedom in communication and create feedback loops with employees have a higher chance of leading a successful organizational culture change.

Within the subthemes of communication of predetermined strategies up and down the management hierarchy and creating feedback loops with important team members, I found that executives who allow sufficient communication throughout all levels of an organization and middle managers who create feedback loops have a more significant chance of organizational culture change success. All four participants acknowledged the difficulty in allowing all levels of employees to ask questions of executives freely. However, they countered by noting that middle managers should participate in pre-planning risk mitigation and participate in identifying and answering likely questions from employees. Executives who communicate a clear vision and allow employees to communicate freely to all levels of the organization chart improve the chance of employee acceptance of organizational culture change. Middle managers who set up

feedback loops can help promote freedom of communication and increase employee acceptance of culture change.

In the theme of identifying and addressing key risks and barriers to culture change, senior management that identifies risks and critical barriers early and creates risk and mitigation plans with middle managers before rollout to employees increases the likelihood of success of organizational culture change. Participants noted the need for preemptive identification of risks between middle managers and executives and the creation of risk mitigation plans before rollout. The four participants stressed the importance of communicating risks among all levels of management early in the change management process. I concluded that executives who create a risk mitigation plan with middle managers before rollout have a greater chance of employees accepting organizational culture change.

Within the subthemes of identifying key risks and barriers to culture change, I determined that executives who create risk mitigation plans with all managers have a more significant chance of organizational culture change success. Participants acknowledged the difficulty in creating risk mitigation plans at the executive level. However, they suggested the involvement of middle managers to help identify potential risks and develop the mitigation plan. Executives who discuss potential risks with middle managers and who develop risk mitigation plans improve the likelihood of organizational culture change success. Middle managers involved in risk identification help executives identify and plan for potential risks to culture change.

Each component uncovered in the emerging themes of participating in and communicating organizational culture change strategies, creating clear communication channels, and identifying key risks and barriers to culture change falls within the conceptual framework of transformational leadership theory. Within the scope of transformational leadership (see Burns, 1978), influencing organizational culture change success by creating organizational culture change strategies, creating clear communication channels, and identifying key risks and barriers to culture change with middle managers aligns with the theory that providing middle managers with suitable strategies can increase organizational culture change success and improve financial performance. The combination of executive preplanning and middle managers' involvement before rollout increases the likelihood of organizational culture change success.

Business leaders could use the findings of this study to create organizational culture change strategies for middle managers to improve culture change acceptance, adoption, and an eventual firm financial performance. I concluded that executives participating in organizational culture change strategies and plans, creating clear communication channels, and identifying key risks and barriers to culture change with the enabled assistance of middle managers can increase the success rate of organizational culture change. Bak et al. (2022) expressed the importance of circular communication in transformational leadership, supporting the involvement of middle managers at the beginning of an organizational culture change. Goldstein (2022) echoed the conclusion and noted the importance of middle managers during any significant organizational

change. Executives of a firm can realize quicker fiscal improvement and employee desired behavior with these strategies.

Implications for Social Change

Developing and implementing enhanced strategies for organizational culture change can improve employee health, morale, and job satisfaction. Employees benefit from leaders and managers who convey high emotional intelligence and perceive the employees' emotions during organizational culture change (Mishra & Dey, 2021). Effective organizational change strategies can also increase job satisfaction and culture buy-in (Klein & Milner, 2020). Employees who buy into the executive's desired culture were likelier to have higher morale, increasing personal health (Boyukaslan & Aşikoğlu, 2022). Employees see a better future with a company with a positive culture, resulting in improved morale and personal health.

Different industries likely demonstrate various other results as culture change strategies impact stakeholders. Employees across firms see different job satisfaction levels with organizational culture change (Arghode et al., 2022). Employees may see different levels of social enhancement based on professional satisfaction due to cultural or geographic differences (Boyukaslan & Aşikoğlu, 2022). Business leaders who create and define strategies with middle managers during organizational culture change may see positive external impacts beyond employees that can benefit their customers and local communities through corporate sustainability.

Recommendations for Action

My recommendations for action in this study can be used to expedite and strengthen the employee acceptance of the new culture. For instance, when creating strategies for culture change before administration, the companies reviewed faced challenges in creating strategies for culture change. I found that participants recognized the difficulty in creating strategies and communicating with all levels of management before the rollout of culture change. Participants discussed overcoming the challenges of creating strategies by involving middle managers early in the culture change process. Executives who included middle managers in major corporate decisions promote engagement, buy-in, and trust from management teams (Bayhan & Korkmaz, 2021). Executives should purposefully involve middle management in preplanning activities (Bayhan & Korkmaz, 2021). The middle managers of companies should engage purposefully in preplanning with executives, strengthening buy-in from lower management teams.

Furthermore, executives should focus on creating transparent and open communication channels among all levels of employees. Business leaders can reduce employee dissatisfaction and turnover by enabling employees to communicate freely with all levels of the organization (Barnett, 2019). Transformational leaders encourage employee engagement and welcome feedback from every employee (Lin & Huang, 2021). Executives who use transformational leadership and enable open communication and collaboration create a group dynamic that benefits individuals, departments, and organizational financial performance.

Organizational leaders at all levels could benefit from the study findings, which included multiple strategies for improving organizational culture change success. Middle managers have found notable improvements in organizational culture change success by their teams when utilizing only a few of these strategies. The advantages of transformational leadership included engaged employees, improved morale, and greater buy-in to the change (Nissinen et al., 2022). Additional potential benefits of employing transformational leadership during organizational culture change included increased collaboration, innovation, and improved organizational sustainability (Rebs et al., 2020). I will disseminate the results of this study by creating seminars with training, presentations, and meetings with organizations that are looking to improve culture change success. I expect to also share this information through academic journals and/or at conferences.

Recommendations for Further Research

I discovered numerous limitations while collecting data for this study. Getting middle managers to agree to an interview was initially challenging because there was no participation remuneration. Mwita (2022) warned that getting proper participation and data saturation is difficult without compensating participants for their time. Additionally, more secondary data could have assisted in triangulation beyond the public financial record for each publicly traded company reviewed (see Mwita, 2022). Further research could include more participation, private companies, different leadership methods, more forms of secondary data, and other research methodologies beyond qualitative case studies.

With this exploration of effective strategies middle managers use to support organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance, a quantitative study was an opportunity for additional research. A quantitative approach would require analyzing the differences or similarities of variables (Rebs et al., 2020); additional research could include the independent variables of privately held corporations that recently conducted organizational culture change and a leadership style that was not transformational leadership style with a dependent variable of organizational performance. With this type of study, a researcher could use the Modern Leadership Questionnaire, surveys, and random sampling to gain additional internal data from the middle managers (Rebs et al., 2020).

Some of the detailed discussions the four participants gave could be included in future research. Participants noted the difficulty of any culture change for all levels of management because of overworked managers and employees (lack of time), human nature, and the natural fear of change. Some potential topics included how to overcome employee apathy for a change, employee disengagement, ineffective communication loops, and employee job satisfaction barriers. Other challenges to organizational culture change that could be studied are exploring how employees view their jobs related to organizational culture goals.

Reflections

The focus of this study was highly relevant to me, as I have experienced five organizational culture changes in 23 years at the same company, both as an employee and a middle manager. Moosa (2019) suggested avoiding personal connections to participants

and organizations where one has personal ties to avoid bias. I therefore interviewed middle managers from companies where I had no personal or professional ties. Moosa suggested interjecting comments and personal opinions in qualitative interviews. I worked hard to prevent any interjection of personal opinions during the interview and analysis process. I initially saw the benefits of involving middle managers in organizational culture change, I constantly self-reflected and questioned my personal biases during the process, as suggested by Pearse (2021). I allowed the research findings to dictate my conclusions during the process.

I believe the interview process was a positive experience for participants and allowed them to communicate how their organizational culture change processes were effective, but amenable to improvement. All participants appreciated the opportunity to share what they thought was done well and poorly with culture change. The four participants mentioned how they had previously considered the importance of culture change rollout and hoped their answers could contribute to other organizations' effectively and efficiently changing cultures. I do thank them for their time and honest conversations.

My thinking changed throughout the doctoral study, bringing additional questions and a desire for further information on organizational culture change. After the interview process, I questioned the narrow industry selection of this study and wondered how private corporations rolled out organizational culture change. Numerous studies exist on public companies and executives but rarely private corporations. Some of the participants discussed the challenge of quickly rolling out any change in a corporation while trying to

do the expected workload. Participants' insights into the different methods experienced with culture change within two companies showed a lack of a singular change management process for culture change. I learned from this example that there were multiple strategies for culture change, and their effectiveness will differ among industries and companies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore effective strategies and processes middle managers use to support and implement organizational culture change initiatives to increase organizational financial performance. I interviewed four participants from two public companies, conducted member checking, and reviewed publicly available financial data during culture change time periods to triangulate data. I identified three major themes: (a) participating in organizational culture change strategies and plans, (b) creating clear communication channels, and (c) identifying and addressing key risks and barriers to culture change, all of which were identified as being catalysts for improving firms' fiscal performance through supportive cultural changes.

There are many benefits and proof that successful organizational culture change, and enabling middle managers' participation, improves fiscal performance. Creating organizational culture change strategies, providing frequent and clear communication, and identifying key risks to change with middle managers can catalyze organizational culture change success. Middle managers involved in the culture change process early can help executives navigate the difficulty of organizational change. Leaders using

transformational leadership throughout the change process can promote better adoption of culture change. Executives who involve middle managers early have the potential to change the culture quickly and mitigate resistance.

Creating organizational culture change strategies, frequent and clear communication, and identifying key risks and barriers to culture change by management come with challenges. Executives may need help in providing middle managers with sufficient time for these activities. Participants acknowledged the challenges of involving middle managers while maintaining daily operations. However, participants noted that middle managers could alleviate much of the change in work by helping and identifying employee potential questions and risks with executives. The participating middle managers revealed the necessity of preplanning and open communication and suggested feedback loops through all levels of an organization. Thorough change plans, open communication, and risk analysis are vital for successful organizational culture change.

My principal takeaway from this doctoral study was that executives should involve middle managers in the culture change process early to help create change, communication, and risk avoidance plans. Executives must recognize the importance of middle managers in any organizational change. I found that the middle manager's desire to help with change through collaboration, communication, and planning to improve organizational culture change success. By involving middle managers in the change process, executives can increase the chance of successful culture change transformations for increasing their organizations' financial performance.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: To Interview Middle Managers on Organizational Culture Change Experience
1. Begin with a brief introduction of the researcher, the research topic, and an overview of how the data may be used.
2. Acknowledge the importance of the participants time and thank them for their participation and support.
3. Review the signed consent form and ask if there are questions or concerns regarding their authorized consent to participate
4. Inform the participant that I will be using video conference to audio record and transcribe the interview.
5. Note the date and time of the interview.
6. Mention that I have 8 questions and that the interview should take between 50-60 minutes to complete after follow up questions.
7. Ask the questions. Watch for non-verbal cues. Paraphrase as needed. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth.
8. Give the participant ample time to answer each question.
9. Offer the participant the opportunity to give any additional data that I did not ask.
10. Thank the participants for their time and participation.
11. Mention next steps: member checking and that upon completion of the study; I will share a summary of the study.