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## Discovering Strategies to Lead Teams Abruptly Forced into Virtual Environments Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Shonelle Maria Ramserran  
*Walden University*

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Shonelle Maria Ramserran

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Review Committee

Dr. Kimberly Anthony, Committee Chairperson, Management Faculty

Dr. Jose Perez, Committee Member, Management Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2024

Abstract

Discovering Strategies to Lead Teams Abruptly Forced into Virtual Environments Due to  
the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

Shonelle Maria Ramserran

MPhil, Walden University, 2022

MScPM, University of Liverpool, 2014

BTech, Toronto Metropolitan (formerly Ryerson) University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

COVID-19 was an unprecedented time in the global economy, causing a massive shift for many organizations conducting business. The speed at which organizations needed to implement World Health Organization's restrictions and transition their teams from face-to-face to virtual environments was unpredictable. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore what leaders prepared for an organization to cope with situations like COVID-19 when abruptly moving employees from face-to-face to virtual environments. A conceptual framework based on the organizational change theory and the team adaptation theory was used to direct this study. The research question address what strategies leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams. Semistructured interviews were used to collect the data from 11 mid-to-senior level managers in a retail home renovation organization in Canada. A thematic analysis and Saldaña's two-tiered coding process were conducted. The following four themes emerged: (a) bringing humanity back into the workplace, (b) mitigating extraordinary crisis and change, (c) swiftly pivoting to providing structure to business, and (d) adapting to the unconventional workplace environment. Within these four themes, leadership strategies for coping with the abrupt changes brought on by COVID-19 were discovered. The findings can contribute to positive social change by teaching leaders and managers what skills are needed, what strategies work, and how to continue to put the employees' needs first to foster productivity at every level of the organization.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this research study to my two small children, Cole Cater and Nicco Roberson, who inspire me daily and push me to be curious in everything I do; I love you immensely. You both are my motivation always to be better than I am. To my parents, Gail and Samuel Ramserran, thank you for your support and unconditional love. Everything I have become has been done with your help, and for that, I am grateful. To my fiancé, Dr. Rashad Roberson, you have been a genuinely devoted, caring, and motivating source. You have loved me through the most challenging times of this study, and I love you for your patience, strength, and consistency. To my dearest friend and confidant, Ariana Peters, you have continuously believed in me; your name is etched in every part of my life. I have always wanted to conquer everything I undertake, but without the support of my family, friends, peers, and the greatness of God, I would not have been as accomplished as I am today. The abundance of love, motivation, and encouragement has been overwhelming, and I would like to thank you all for everything you have provided me on this journey. Words are not sufficient for how much I appreciate you all. Thank you.

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	vi
List of Figures .....	i
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background of the Study .....	3
Problem Statement .....	8
Purpose of the Study .....	8
Research Question .....	9
Conceptual Framework.....	9
Nature of the Study .....	12
Definitions.....	13
Assumptions.....	14
Scope and Delimitations .....	16
Limitations .....	16
Significance of the Study .....	17
Significance to Practice.....	18
Significance to Theory .....	18
Significance to Social Change .....	18
Summary and Transition.....	19
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	21
Literature Search Strategy.....	22
Conceptual Framework.....	24



Literature Review.....	28
The Abrupt COVID-19 Situation Affecting Health, Society, and the Economy .....	29
Leadership Strategies Pre-Pandemic and the Relationship to Team Development.....	35
Communication in the Workplace pre-pandemic .....	42
Face-to-face Teams vs Virtual Teams .....	51
The Leadership Dilemma as Work from Home (WFH) was abruptly driven by COVID-19 .....	55
Organizational Change and the COVID-19 Pandemic .....	62
Leadership Approach to Team Adaptation in the Face of COVID-19 .....	65
Summary and Conclusions .....	69
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	71
Research Design and Rationale .....	71
Role of the Researcher .....	73
Methodology .....	75
Participant Selection Logic .....	76
Instrumentation .....	77
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection .....	79
Data Analysis Plan .....	82
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	85
Credibility .....	86

Transferability .....	87
Dependability .....	87
Confirmability .....	88
Ethical Procedures .....	88
Summary .....	90
Chapter 4: Results .....	92
Research Setting.....	93
Demographics .....	93
Data Collection .....	96
Data Analysis .....	100
Transcriptions and Coding.....	101
Professional Relationship Management.....	104
Emotional Responses for Teams and Leadership .....	105
Managing Challenging Change.....	106
Working Location .....	106
Positive Social Change .....	107
Discrepant Cases.....	107
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	108
Credibility .....	108
Transferability.....	109
Dependability .....	110
Confirmability.....	111

Study Results .....	112
Theme 1: Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace .....	113
Theme 2: Mitigating Extraordinary Crisis and Change .....	130
Theme 3: Swiftly Pivoting to Providing Structure to Business .....	140
Theme 4: Adapting to the Unconventional Workplace Environment .....	148
Summary .....	154
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	156
Interpretation of Findings .....	156
Finding 1: Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace .....	157
Finding 2: Mitigating Extraordinary Crisis and Change .....	161
Finding 3: Swiftly Pivoting to Providing Structure to Business .....	163
Finding 4: Adapting to the Unconventional Workplace Environment .....	166
Limitations of the Study .....	169
Recommendations .....	170
Recommendations for Further Studies .....	170
Recommendations for Leadership Strategies .....	172
Recommendations for Social Change .....	175
Implications .....	176
Social Change Implication .....	176
Methodological Implications .....	177
Theoretical Implications .....	178
Empirical Implications .....	181

Conclusions.....	182
References.....	184
Appendix A: E-mail Invitation to Potential Participants .....	201
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Case Study Interviewees .....	204
Appendix C: Interview Guide.....	206
Appendix D: Codes, Categories, and Themes .....	213

## List of Tables

Table 1. Demographics and Characteristics of Participants .....	95
Table 2. Examples of Top Recurring Codes, Categories, and Themes .....	104
Table 3. Three-Word Summation for Experience with COVID-19 .....	130
Table A4. Codes, Categories, and Themes .....	213

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Design ..... 12

Figure 2. Working Location Timeline ..... 152

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The coronavirus-2 (COVID-19) pandemic started in 2020, was unpredictable, and upended the world. The newly discovered strain of flu is a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2, 2019-nCoV), also known as COVID-19 (Stocker et al., 2023). COVID-19 was officially announced as a disease by the World Health Organization (WHO) on February 11, 2020. By March 2020, WHO declared the coronavirus to be a pandemic disease worldwide (Singh & Singh, 2020). Initially, the pandemic began as a health and social shock and then developed into the most profound global economic recession occurring in almost a century (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic caused more than double the impact of the 2008 financial crisis (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). For all businesses, whether in the goods or services sector, the future of the economy and society worldwide was changing indefinitely.

In March 2020, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also predicted how this disease would affect the economy. The OECD reevaluated what they expected the global growth to be due to the pandemic, dropping from their initial prediction of 2.9% down to 2.4%, with the probability that the worldwide growth could fall as low as 1.5% (Gupta et al., 2020; Singh & Singh, 2020). Another major setback on a global level was the drop in demand for oil as the worldwide industry reduced production, which resulted in the plummeting of sales (Gupta et al., 2020). In a short time, this caused a significant fall in the global stock markets, with markets falling more than 20%; a more recent study showed countries with more than 1000 cases of COVID-19 had a lowered GDP, except Malaysia (Gupta et al., 2020;

Rathnayaka et al., 2023). All these issues factored in created an enormous challenge for organizations to continue their day-to-day business as lockdowns and quarantines ensued to help contain the virus.

WHO recommended that people avoid contact with others to help curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus through social distancing, keeping six feet away from others, and quarantining, isolation with no contact with others when encountering someone infected (Singh & Singh, 2020). The second quarter of 2020 saw many small businesses go under, businesses deemed nonessential by the government or that had too much human contact involved in exchanging their goods or services (Singh & Singh, 2020). Figuring out which companies were essential led to lockdowns and enforcement of restrictions for health safety reasons (Fairlie & Fossen, 2022). As the local implementation of regulations on social interactions and enforced lockdowns ensued, organizations faced the changes of working through virtual environments that were thrown together haphazardly (Fairlie & Fossen, 2022).

The pandemic created a world that forced people to work from home to be safe, increasing the need for remote working and schooling (Singh & Singh, 2020). Although remote working was not new to businesses, for many of these companies, virtual teams abruptly arrived on their doorstep to compensate for the loss of the in-person interactions that were frequent in an office setting (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). The challenge in society for managers now came in the form of learning to lead a team, which was abruptly forced into a virtual environment (Mayer et al., 2023). The newly formed teams



were all under the same stress as they would have been in face-to-face teams, but now, they had little to no previous experience or even a choice in working in a virtual team.

Chapter 1 consists of the introduction and background of the study, then the problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, the theoretical framework, and lastly, the nature of the study. Also included in this chapter are specific definitions, assumptions for the study, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance of the study, and a concluding summary.

### **Background of the Study**

According to the literature, the COVID-19 pandemic created many new challenges for organizations and how their leaders managed the functionality of their teams through rapid changes (Mayer et al., 2023). Mayer et al. (2023) iterate that those leaders adjusted from working in face-to-face teams and abruptly moved into virtual team environments as stay-at-home mandates rolled out across Canada and the world (Mayer et al., 2023; Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated nuances that any successful business leader did not previously experience during a natural disaster or crisis (Singh & Singh, 2020). The problem became the “how” to adapt to the crises by brainstorming what to do to mediate issues; the most important one was communication (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). As many types of businesses were able to move in the direction of virtual teams, significant gains in online sales grew by 180% (Fairlie & Fossen, 2022).

The shift forced consumers to participate in online shopping, refraining from in-person shopping, and has since exploded the online shopping medium (Fairlie & Fossen, 2022). While the crisis continued and businesses shifted to accommodate the change, the

onus trickled from immediate organizational change to team leaders helping their teams adapt and continue working uninterrupted while simultaneously moving into a virtual team environment (Mitchell, 2023). The way technology rapidly integrated across organizations due to the COVID-19 pandemic changed how companies operated and presented their products or services to their customers (Mitchell, 2023). The changes occurred mainly operationally through online communication, impacting organizations economically and socially and requiring more flexibility and people-oriented work environments. Finding a way to mitigate the positives with the abruptness of the crisis was nothing short of a challenging balance for organizational leadership (Mayer et al., 2023). The critical issue many organizations faced was needing specific strategies or best practices to accommodate these unexpected changes (Mayer et al., 2023).

Concerning previous experiences, there is research on managing a virtual team but not on teams abruptly forced into a virtual environment (Mayer et al., 2023). Existing literature states that teams who voluntarily moved toward hybrid or virtual teams have encountered difficulties when making the change (Kukytė & Jasinskis, 2021). For example, since the reduction in face-to-face interaction, some familiar topics, such as communication, coordination, and trust, have become more difficult to establish (Kukytė & Jasinskis, 2021; Setyanitami et al., 2023). There can also be a lack of clarity and understanding about the roles of each member, and with role ambiguity, many more misunderstandings about the end goal for the individual, team, and organization (Kukytė & Jasinskis, 2021). Although voluntary virtual teams face these challenges, they tend to be more mentally prepared for transitioning from face-to-face teams to virtual teams,

diminishing the cognitive dissonance about the change. There is no immediate indication of the influences discovered to adapt the challenges mentioned for voluntary virtual teams in the case of an abrupt situation like the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). There is past literature on strategies for managers who have moved employees voluntarily to a hybrid or virtual team. Still, little research exists on strategies or best practices for leaders managing a team that abruptly shifted to a virtual team in a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023).

With teams abruptly forced into virtual environments, leadership faces new challenges for virtual team collaboration and how to manage them. Specifically needed is an understanding of management strategies for best practices for employees who were previously working in a face-to-face environment and were abruptly forced into a virtual team due to a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). These elements have expanded into communication, alongside commonly used terms such as commitment, accountability, trust, and others when describing teams.

One of the most significant components of communication lost once transitioned into a virtual team, according to Yusof and Rahmat (2020), is body language. There have been many studies on how much communication is non-verbal and the advantages of seeing the person when communicating to understand all the cues from what they are trying to communicate (Spence, 2020; Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). There can be elevated misunderstandings between co-workers due to the lack of non-verbal communication

within virtual teams. Spence (2020) explains Dr. Mehrabian's study in the 1960s on the three parts of communication. Dr. Mehrabian describes the 7, 38, and 55 model, which, although established long ago, is still highly relevant today. According to Dr. Mehrabian, communication breakdown starts with the words used when speaking, accounting for 7% of communication. In contrast, the voice with changes in volume, tone, and intonation made up 38%, but the most considerable percentage was non-verbal at 55% (Spence, 2020). Leaders now needed to consider how they would manage their teams with about a 55% loss in communication because of a virtual team environment.

As companies drastically changed their work sites for employees by encouraging work from home, a new learning curve was introduced for leaders leading in virtual environments. Luring and Jonasson (2018) state that although the number of global virtual teams has multiplied, leaders still need help to achieve internal collaboration across geographic, cultural, and linguistic barriers. COVID-19 exponentially increased the number of virtual teams worldwide in only a few short months, leaving no room for error for organizations (Chai & Park, 2022; Gifford, 2022; Mitchell, 2023). With limited literature on leadership and forced virtual work situations brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to report on leadership strategies and best practices regarding team adaptation and organizational change via performance in virtual teams (Bartsch et al., 2020; Gifford, 2022).

Documentation shows that transitioning from face-to-face to virtual teams could have been smoother and amicable. According to Mayer et al. (2023), some difficulties included overcoming communication barriers, such as lacking non-verbal

communication, establishing trust, and maintaining critical team cohesion. The abrupt change surprised organizations, especially those who had not regularly performed in virtual teams. Lewin's organizational change theory attempts to move upper-level management to change within an organization (Endrejat & Burnes, 2024).

Team leaders and upper-level management are responsible for leading their subordinates through crisis. In a virtual team, leadership that considers behavior based on each team member's situation was imperative to solve the obstacles brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mayer et al., 2023). Leadership needed to be present and involved so that the members of the teams received the assistance they needed to complete their assigned tasks while maintaining a supportive and amicable relationship (Mayer et al., 2023).

The question was how to ensure the team could embrace the needed adaptation and how the leaders facilitated the changes. Burke et al. (2006) speak about team adaptation theory, where leaders are encouraged to embrace and teach their teams how to cope with changes. Existing literature indicates that virtual team research in North America focused on transformational and transactional leadership styles, which generally have been found to produce different effects, with the latter being the least effective for virtual teams (Lauring & Jonasson, 2018). The authors' results indicate that inspirational motivation leadership offers goal-setting to help virtual global teams overcome problems related to insufficient internal communication (Lauring & Jonasson, 2018).

## **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in this study was the lack of leadership strategies that exist in the literature for managers to cope with the abrupt transition from face-to-face to virtual teams uncovered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic created new organizational challenges and induced work lockdowns, forcing leadership to pivot to a virtual team environment (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Singh & Singh, 2020). The abrupt change required leadership to adjust from solely working in face-to-face teams (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Singh & Singh, 2020). Individual businesses within different industries, such as factories, restaurants, pubs, all types of markets, airline flights, supermarkets, malls large and small, universities, and colleges, among many others, were shut down to help stop the transmission of COVID-19 (Mitchell, 2023; Singh & Singh, 2020). An estimated 54% of McKinsey global executives surveyed said that remote work and collaboration increased during the pandemic (Mitchell, 2023). Not surprisingly, another survey done by McKinsey revealed that 41% of employees might continue to work virtually post-pandemic compared to 30% pre-pandemic, encouraging a need for updated leadership strategies (Mitchell, 2023).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore what leaders prepared for an organization to cope with situations like COVID-19 when abruptly moving employees from face-to-face to virtual environments. While voluntary virtual teams did exist prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is little research on the strategies

of how to lead teams unilaterally forced into a virtual team environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mitchell, 2023). The abruptness of the situation left room for studies to examine strategies discovered to lead employees forced into virtual teams by lockdown measures (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023).

There has been a disconnect for leaders in managing employees who were abruptly forced into a virtual team as new situations change employee emotional and behavioral responses, well-being, and job-related satisfaction (Bartsch et al., 2020). The ability to lead employees forced into virtual teams and develop empirical advice for implementing shared leadership in the context of virtual teams is needed to ensure successful business results if a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic were to occur again (Mayer et al., 2023). For leaders to be successful in times of crisis, they need to be mindful of their teams' maturity, capacity, ability, collaborative nature, and interrelationships for their highest level of functionality, and in so doing, must establish strategies and best practices for success in a virtual environment (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023).

### **Research Question**

What strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theories that ground this study include Lewin's organizational change theory and Burke et al.'s (2006) team adaptation theory. For changes to occur, employees must

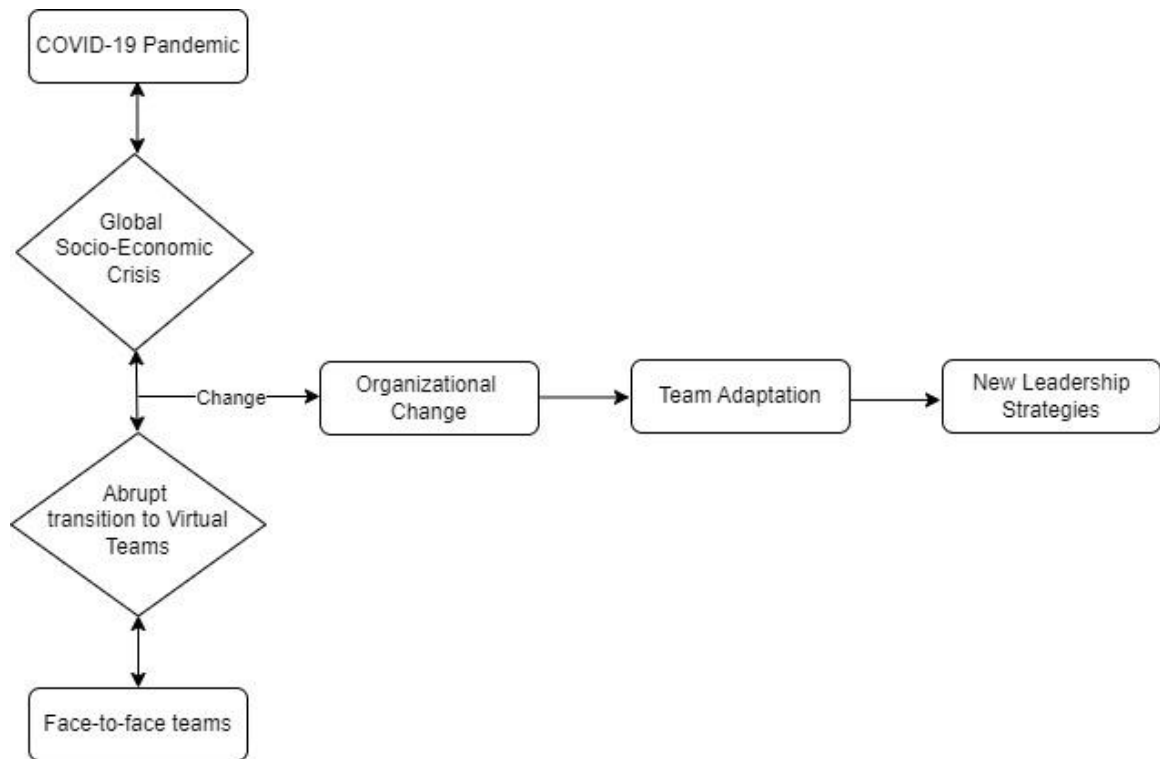
trust their role models and leadership to set the example of what processes to undergo for change, the theory of studying organizational changes (Meng et al., 2023). Lewin's organizational change theory is as follows: (1) use plain language to explain your concepts; (2) use drawings to illustrate and explain the change situation; and (3) focus on the exceptions and not the rules to generate a better understanding of the nature of organizational life (Endrejat & Burnes, 2024). The organizational change theory specifically includes the three-step behavioral change model (three-step model), which includes unfreezing, moving, and freezing to create organizational change (Burnes, 2020). The three-step model is an option for leaders who have been faced with the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic when their face-to-face teams were abruptly moved into virtual team environments (Endrejat & Burnes, 2024). The exact implications apply, but the strategies that kept the organizations afloat must be clarified.

When looking at what is occurring in an organization where team members are forced into a new environment and working within new parameters, some adaptation must occur for the team to function. According to Burke et al. (2006), team adaptation refers to a team's judgments regarding urgent environmental changes (Meng et al., 2023). Meng et al. (2023) suggested that in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgent environmental change for employees and significant consequences for teams with adjustments to move forward (Meng et al., 2023). Consequently, team adaptation, defined by Burke et al. (2006), is a change in team performance in response to a salient cue or cue stream that leads to a functional outcome for the entire team (Meng et al., 2023). In the team adaptation theory, the adaptive cycle will decipher how the team will move through



the change. The four core constructs used in the adaptive cycle presented by Burke et al. (2006) are (a) situation assessment, (b) plan formulation, (c) plan execution, and (d) team learning (Meng et al., 2023). The team adaptive cycle encourages leaders to take control of the team in a way that contributes to the team's cohesiveness. The leadership in team adaptation is not done only by delegation but by setting examples for the team to follow and promoting organizational change.

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of the study include the need for organizational change theory and team adaptation theory as dramatic changes occurred in organizations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both may reveal the best practices that would be valuable for an organization regarding strategies to create the most suitable working environment for virtual teams in a crisis like COVID-19. The following diagram shows how COVID-19 collided with face-to-face teams, creating a global crisis and the immediate need for change in organizations, for teams to adapt, and for leadership to accommodate.

**Figure 1***Conceptual Framework Design***Nature of the Study**

To address the research question in this qualitative study, the specific research design includes a single exploratory case study with a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach interviewing mid-to-senior level managers (Yin, 2018). This analysis utilizes NVivo coding to improve the understanding of the strategies that mid-to-senior level managers discovered. The interviews were done until saturation was reached. This design was chosen to uncover what managers did when the global pandemic ambushed organizations, primarily performing their business in person. Specifically, the research refers to when their face-to-face teams abruptly moved into virtual teams to adapt to the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

These types of problems are best solved with this research design, which focuses on one single organization for the case study (Schoch, 2020). According to Yin (2018), a case study is an empirical study or inquiry that includes a detailed analysis of a situation within a group of affected people (Yin, 2018). This study used a single case study to examine an organization that experienced COVID-19 repercussions on leadership during the pandemic. The goal was to investigate one organization and how their managers perceived they could achieve the goals set out before the pandemic and what they did to cope with the changes brought about.

### **Definitions**

The definitions of terms in this section clarify the different terms used throughout this study. Most of the terms in this study are also in different existing literature and other industry areas. The definitions of the terms should assist the reader in understanding their usage and can exist in peer-reviewed literature for further confirmation.

*Face-to-face Teams:* This term refers to traditional teams where individuals are collocated and work at close physical distance from their co-workers. These teams typically have individuals who work in the same building where they can have in-person interaction, including spontaneous interaction alongside scheduled interaction throughout the workday (Carozzo-Todaro et al., 2021).

*Leadership Strategies:* This term refers to a type of resource that, when used in an organization, releases the potential to result in solutions to problems that benefit the organization (Adoli & Kilika, 2020).

*Organizational Change Theory:* This term refers to the work of Lewin that contributed to the development of field theory, group dynamics, action research, and the three-step change model (Batras et al., 2014). In Lewin's work, these themes are necessary to create change through their understanding. As leaders of organizations are looking to make changes, they must look at them together to implement the theory properly (Batras et al., 2014).

*Team Adaptation Theory:* This term refers to Burke et al.'s work, defined as a change in the way a team performs as the result of a particular stimulus, whether internally or externally, to the organization that eventually changes the way a team functions in response to the stimuli. (Meng et al., 2023).

*Virtual Environments:* This term refers to the actual communication systems in which participants share the same digital space and can navigate, manipulate objects, and interact with one another through the internet. These systems increased as COVID-19 appeared to replace or supplement workplaces, conferences, trade shows, and workshops (Carozzo-Todaro et al., 2021).

*Virtual Teams:* This term refers to a group of individuals forming a team that is in different geographical areas, has little to no in-person interactions, and performs their goals and objectives as a team interdependently using different forms of technology and the internet for collaboration (Zeuge et al., 2020).

### **Assumptions**

This qualitative study includes several assumptions or some aspects of the research that are understood to be accurate. The methodology selected to uncover

answers to the research question has characteristics that include known assumptions (Yin, 2018). The qualitative single exploratory case study with a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach interviewing mid-to-senior level managers comes with several assumptions (Yin, 2018). The first assumption is that mid-to-senior level managers' research participants would give insight into how COVID-19 occurred for them in their working environment. These experiences would be based on their knowledge within their organization and with their team members during the transition from face-to-face to virtual teams. The second assumption was that the research participants would provide a true and accurate account of the events, providing details from their experiences throughout the interview process. The information would include their previous interactions with other members of their teams and other members of leadership.

The third assumption was that the information collected from the research participants might help add to the body of knowledge by providing strategies or best practices for leading a team through a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses to the open-ended questions were essential as the observations of reality were not firsthand, meaning the data gathered through the case study held the most weight for the results. The fourth assumption was that the interviews done through the case study would be documented anonymously, accurately recorded, and accurately transcribed, ensuring that the interviewee was not burdened with preconceived notions or biases. The final assumption was that a sufficient qualitative data collection instrument would be used to record the collected data in the study results.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Delimitations are definitions meant to determine the boundaries of the research and are controlled to prevent the study from becoming too large to complete. The boundaries set for the study are conscious decisions of the researcher as to what will or will not be included in the research. This research used a single exploratory qualitative case study. The attempt was to gather information on how mid-to-senior level managers could cope with the abrupt changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the leadership strategies implemented to continue business as usual within an organization.

The scope of this study consisted of a single exploratory qualitative case study. The scope of this study included a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach to interview mid-to-senior level managers. The case study included anonymous online interviews and recordings of the mid-to-senior level manager totaling 15-20 participants or until saturation was met (Mason, 2010). The sample population for the study included the following criteria: adults over the age of 18, of any gender, who were in managerial positions between 2019 and 2024 and experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic within a Canadian-based organization (Yin, 2018). These individuals must have been willing and able to provide answers to open-ended questions about their intrinsic, in-depth experiences.

### **Limitations**

A potential barrier when collecting primary data includes the individuals' availability, privacy, and non-disclosure agreements they may infringe on by providing information and timelines. A second limitation of this study was that the case study will

be done in one organization, which may limit the possibility of generalization. A third limitation could be the difficulty of reproducing the same study twice, as the study could be complex to replicate the study precisely what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The idea comes from Burke et al. (2006), who noted that the challenges in measuring team adaptation are assessing what needs adaptation and selecting the best times to collect team data (Ali et al., 2019).

A fourth limitation was if any participants decided not to perform the interview as a minimum number of interviews is required to reach saturation. According to Bertaux, in 1981, the smallest acceptable sample size for any qualitative research was recalled (Mason, 2010). A fifth assumption was that the study was based on the lived experiences of mid-to-senior level managers, who will be giving their account of the events in their organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results included participant subjectivity, the influence of personal biases, and the issue of whether the information collected would or would not be helpful.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because the results may help other mid-to-senior level managers learn leadership strategies that will aid in managing face-to-face teams that would potentially need to move into virtual teams due to some form of crisis. The probability of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic occurring for a second time in the lifetime of these managers is slim to none. However, other crises may arise that need a list of best practices for leadership strategies. The following explains this study's significance to practice, theory, and positive social change.

**Significance to Practice**

This study is significant in that the discoveries may equip managers conducting business in traditional face-to-face teams and challenge them to pursue business success in abrupt situations with best practices and strategies to lead in abruptly formed virtual team environments (Mitchell, 2023). Literature suggests that leaders steer employees using team cooperation-based structure in an uncertain environment to achieve team adaptation and training team members to understand the changed situation to achieve successful business results (Yue et al., 2019). As the newly established virtual environments brought about by COVID-19 become the norm, the pandemic has indefinitely changed the future of work.

**Significance to Theory**

The study findings support the literature in that the results may help leaders in similar situations. They can become more aware of what leadership strategies would benefit success in an abrupt virtual environment brought about by crisis (Mitchell, 2023). Additionally, leaders may benefit from learning how to lead virtually in a pandemic-like disruptive situation. The learnings could be insightful if a similar situation were to occur again and to do so while helping to mitigate the expectations of their employees (Bartsch et al., 2020).

**Significance to Social Change**

These strategies could increase leadership's ability to help their teams adapt to change while establishing team cohesiveness and empowering them to be more suited to adapt to organizational change. Further, leadership development is a key performance



indicator that is transferable to all stakeholders in the environment and society, anticipating that the result will be a positive social change.

### **Summary and Transition**

COVID-19 was undoubtedly a shock on a global scale, with the socio-economic status of the world dramatically shifting starting at the beginning of 2020 (Mayer et al., 2023). Management faced many challenges stemming from WHO's health-recommended restrictions for the general population's health and safety, forcing entire countries into lockdown (Stocker et al., 2023). As COVID-19 exploded worldwide, management immediately moved their face-to-face teams into virtual teams as abruptly as within a week turnaround (Mayer et al., 2023). The specific management problem explored a need for leadership strategies for managers to cope with the abrupt transition from face-to-face teams to virtual teams uncovered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). When employees are requested to work in a virtual environment that cannot replicate a face-to-face environment, intentional processes are needed for leadership to develop strategies or best practices for virtual teams (Mitchell, 2023).

This qualitative single exploratory case study includes a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach interviewing mid-to-senior level managers who were abruptly forced to pivot from face-to-face teams to virtual teams. The lack of leadership strategies was collected through the case study interviews to meet the study's purpose and provide supporting data for the gap. Data saturation determined the final number of interviews evaluated using transcription coding. Included in Chapter 2 is the literature

search strategy, the conceptual framework, extensive revision of existing literature on COVID-19, leadership, and the transition from face-to-face teams abruptly to virtual teams.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

A need exists for leadership strategies to cope with the abrupt transition from face-to-face teams to virtual teams uncovered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). Mayer et al. suggest that although virtual teams have existed for years, the underlying problem remains that with the digital disruption of COVID-19, leaders needed help to pivot in terms of implementing best practices or strategies for managing teams abruptly forced into virtual environments (Mayer et al., 2023). Employees forced into compulsory leave from their collocated teams due to lockdown measures had no choice but to work remotely to do their jobs for their roles (Bartsch et al., 2020). As the ability to work in a virtual environment cannot replicate a face-to-face environment, there needs to be intentional processes to allow employees to engage in virtual collaboration to achieve their individual goals and the organization's goals (Mitchell, 2023). The processes established by leadership would be included for future onboarding for employees in a virtual environment. They could lead to a more successful transition in the future in the case of an abrupt situation like the COVID-19 pandemic (Mitchell, 2023).

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore what leaders prepared in terms of strategies and best practices for their organization to cope with situations like COVID-19 when moving their employees abruptly from face-to-face teams to virtual teams. Existing literature states that leadership models have been developed over the years to cope with the challenges in the working world and how to function more coherently amidst change (Mayer et al., 2023). Understanding that

COVID-19 is an external crisis for an organization to navigate, leaders must develop ways to manage the new requirements of their employees with the increase in the virtualization of teamwork (Mayer et al., 2023). According to Gera et al. (2013), virtual teamwork will be an organization's more permanent work structure. It should be established for times of crisis as flexibility is needed to transition back and forth between face-to-face and virtual teams seamlessly. The following review of the literature includes topics on the abrupt COVID-19 situation affecting health, society, and the economy, leadership strategies pre-pandemic and the relationship to team development, communication in the workplace pre-pandemic, face-to-face teams vs. virtual teams, the leadership dilemma as work from home was (WFH) abruptly driven by COVID-19, organizational change and the COVID-19 Pandemic, leadership approach to team adaptation in the face of COVID-19.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

When researching information for the literature review, the objective was to analyze scholarly literature regarding the need for leadership strategies to cope with the abrupt transition from face-to-face teams to virtual teams uncovered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). For the significant portion of this literature review, the databases used included the Walden University Library and Google Scholar to assist in gathering resources. The search in the literature used the following databases: ProQuest, EBSCO, SSRN, SAGE, Science Direct, Routledge, Wiley Online Library, and Research Gate. The specific search strategy used included initially working with a librarian to discover themes to search the

databases, then categorizing significant concepts, and deducing keywords and terms related to the study's subject.

Combining different keywords and terms in the databases brought the most relevant scholarly peer-reviewed articles to the forefront. The following main keywords were used for the search: *COVID-19 pandemic, COVID-19 crisis, team working environment, collocated teams, face-to-face teams, forced teams, online team management, online team environment, organizational culture, team cohesiveness, team culture, team building, team forming, virtual environment, virtual team, virtual team management, work environment, and remote working*. Alongside these keywords, the following search terms also brought up relevant resources: *abrupt formation of teams, ecological framework, emotional intelligence (EQ), leadership strategies, crisis management, Burke's team adaptation theory, Lewin's organizational change theory, Tuckman's team creation model, qualitative studies, single case study, social change, transitioning teams, organizational culture, and team culture*. The resources found were current as any information on COVID-19 happened between 2019 and now. For other relevant keywords, I ensured that the peer-reviewed articles found were within the last 5 years and that the literature discussing them was up to date. Some of the most relevant peer-reviewed journals used to write the literature review were The Journal of Business and Management, Journal of Team Performance Management, Journal of Information Technology and People, Journal of Economics and Business, Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, International Journal of Business Communication. They will be pivotal in supporting the study's main topics.

The literature review incorporates prior knowledge of leadership strategies in face-to-face and virtual teams in and around the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also a search for information on crisis management, how crisis management incurred organizational change and team adaptation because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the influences on leadership. With the amalgamation of information from the different data sources, the ability to realize the gap became apparent.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study includes three concepts that illuminate the importance of the research. The three concepts that frame the breadth of this study are leadership, virtual teams, and organizational change. For a more precise understanding, the following defines the three concepts. Leadership in a working environment is the ability to inspire other individuals to accomplish a common goal while creating trust and discipline to meet organizational expectations (Singla & Kaushal, 2022). Virtual teams are individuals forming teams in different geographical areas, having little to no in-person interactions, and performing their goals and objectives interdependently using different forms of technology and the internet for collaboration (Zeuge et al., 2020). Organizational change is where an organized group with a common goal in a company creates the conditions for a process with trial and error until a solution for a new process is successful (Batras et al., 2014). These three concepts connect with the following model and theories that ground this study.

To fully understand the problem with the COVID-19 pandemic within organizations, there is a need to reflect on the functionality of organizations and their

teams when a crisis occurs. The words *change* and *adaptation* come to mind readily, and the following explains the rationale. The two significant theories at the core of this study that focus on the importance of developing leadership strategies to aid in transitioning teams from face-to-face teams to abruptly moving into virtual teams due to a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic are (a) Lewin's organizational change theory and (b) Burke et al., (2006) team adaptation theory. When mitigating crisis management and pivoting, an organization must accept change to be flexible enough to succeed. With organizational change, teams must also learn to be adaptable through the guidance of their management and leadership. These two theories may allow a company to weather the stressors of external crises and create a sustainable environment for future success.

Kurt Lewin's organizational change theory was introduced in his first article, "Human Relations," where he refers to the behavioral change three-step model (three-step model) as unfreezing, moving, and freezing to create change within an organization (Burnes, 2020). He has been influential in the development of organizational dynamics and is famously known for group development, his field theory, action research, and his three-step model (Batras et al., 2014; Burnes, 2020; Endrejat & Burnes, 2024). This study focuses on Lewin's three-step model, which provides a pathway for change by unlearning or replacing organizational counterproductive behaviors (Burnes, 2020). The team norms become successful by creating new organizational standards and behaviors, which, in turn, causes companies to be more resilient and less influenced by external factors that affect organizational change (Burnes, 2020). The three-step model was initially

developed for social conflict and not specifically for organizational change, but the concepts hold steadfast and can be used in many situations (Burnes, 2020).

Another essential aspect of Lewin's repertoire was his focus on field theory, a way of learning about a group of people in a specific environment to map how change occurs in organizations, which was particularly important in learning how a group behaves in a particular setting. Burnes' three-step model was previously used in studying child psychology, where in the late 1920s, he was able to see how children moved through developmental stages, whether they were progressing or regressing (Burnes, 2020). The process can also be used in the development of organizational behavior because the process parallels how changes occur and what creates a behavior of going backward to a previous state that the group in the field study should have already surpassed (Burnes, 2020). To contribute to this study, Lewin noted that he needed to see his thoughts on the topics as temporary, thus leading to flexibility in how companies can develop their solutions organically depending on the situation (Endrejat & Burnes, 2024).

According to Endrejat and Burnes (2024), there is a need for management strategies that consider driving social change through academic rigor that instructs managers to take a more active role in creating change. The three-step model has affected the act of creating social change within an organization, which then is the driving force behind ensuring that the teams are equipped to approach a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainties that crises bring to organizational culture (Burnes, 2020; Endrejat & Burnes, 2024). Lewin's behavioral three-step model was selected to support this study as the three-step model of unfreezing current standards, moving to a new



normal, and freezing the new strategies or best practices adheres to the topic of pre-pandemic in-person teams being abruptly transitioned into virtual team environments during and post-pandemic and what managers used to adjust to the circumstances. Using the three-step model to develop a broader sense of the strategies and best practices for organizations to deal with abrupt change in team environments, there is the opportunity to add to existing literature on COVID-19 and pre-, during-, and post-pandemic teams.

Burke et al.'s (2006) team adaptation theory was introduced similarly in 1982. Notably, team adaptation was found in the works of Cannon-Bowers et al. in their article "Defining Competencies and Establishing Team Training Requirements" (Burke et al., 2006). Investigation about adaptation was established as organizations grew, and a need to consistently be agile to remain relevant emerged (Ybarra, 2023). Team adaptation refers to a modification in how a team performs due to certain internal or external stimuli to the organization, which eventually changes how a team responds to the stimuli. (Meng et al., 2023). The need for a team to learn to cope with the change recently incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic is vital for the organization's survival (Meng et al., 2023).

For this study, the conceptual model of team adaptation focused on the process of the adaptive cycle. The four core constructs used in the adaptive cycle presented by Burke et al. (2006) are (a) situation assessment, (b) plan formulation, (c) plan execution, and (d) team learning (Burke et al., 2006). When using team adaptation and organizational change (or organizational adaptation) together, the understanding is that proper adaptation occurs mainly on a team rather than an organizational level (Ybarra, 2023). Team adaptation can be a more specific reaction to external stressors for teams,

whereby the adaptation cycle is executed (Ybarra, 2023). Teams tend to perform under stable circumstances, where the input, throughput, and output are predictable (Uitdewilligen et al., 2013). The challenge arises when the circumstances abruptly change, decreasing the team's ability to accomplish its goals (Uitdewilligen et al., 2013). The more successful teams must become agile and creative when the opportunity arises to adapt to new unpredictable situations to prevent failure and disasters (Uitdewilligen et al., 2013).

Teams include individuals who work towards a common goal; therefore, the inference is that adaptation occurs individually. Ybarra (2023) explains how and what is needed for individual adaptation, speaking on cognition, motivation, action, and connection. The author describes the study as focusing on those critical skills to understand better what is necessary for individuals to adapt (Ybarra, 2023). While individual adaptation is necessary to the conversation of team adaptation, this study will only briefly speak to individual adaptation as a way of understanding team adaptation (Uitdewilligen et al., 2013).

### **Literature Review**

Upon examining existing literature, resources revealed vast information on leadership, virtual teams, and organizational change. With a thorough search completed, literature still pointed to a need for this study as the gap still existed because leadership strategies needed to transition in an abrupt situation from face-to-face teams to virtual teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic are still necessary (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). Although face-to-face teams may have thrived pre-COVID-19,

organizations were bombarded by unanswerable questions once the pandemic arrived.

The following describes the situation once organizations were made aware of COVID-19, what leadership strategies existed pre-pandemic, how communication changed, and how, moving forward, organizational change and team adaptation would trigger potential changes that may become permanent in the current working world.

### **The Abrupt COVID-19 Situation Affecting Health, Society, and the Economy**

In 2020, #covid19 was the most used hashtag on X (formally Twitter), with users sharing more than 400 million “tweets” (Azizi et al., 2023). In an age where the internet connects everyone and everything, knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic spread almost instantaneously. Social media exploded with information, speculation, fearmongering, news, opinions, conspiracy theories, and more, with the dominant sentiment being that the general population was afraid of the virus and the threat the virus posed to their health and lifestyles (Azizi et al., 2023). Previous literature concedes that the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the biggest world crises this century, after World War II (Azizi et al., 2023; Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was a global health concern, but the disruption affected society and the economy far beyond any predictable measure (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). Since pandemics are not simply about the health of the public but have severe effects on the socio-economic state of the world, the following expands on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected global health, global society, and the global economy on a very rapid timeline (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020).

Health concerns were at the top of individuals' minds worldwide, specifically for businesses with in-person work environments. Leadership in organizations had to abruptly adjust how to maintain their business as usual because, as of March 11, 2020, WHO declared the world to be in a global pandemic (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021; Stocker et al., 2023). COVID-19 was speculated to have started infecting areas of Wuhan, China, and was rapidly spreading to many regions worldwide, deeming COVID-19 a global pandemic (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). The virus was transmitted from human to human when there was close contact with an infected person, with the afflicted individual spreading the virus through coughing, sneezing, respiratory droplets, or aerosols (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). Thus, the suggested requirements by WHO to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 included social distancing, frequent handwashing, wearing a mask, and quarantining if infected. (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020).

These precautions needed to be put into place swiftly, and businesses were encouraged to heed the health warnings of WHO (Stocker et al., 2023). Within two weeks, to curb the spread of COVID-19, entire enterprises and businesses worldwide had closed their doors, and their employees were mandated to work from home (WFH) (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). The immediate and unadulterated shock that came with abruptly transitioning from face-to-face environments to online environments was a dramatic shift for all employees, especially if they had little to no experience working in an online setting (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). The speed at which people were infected was so rapid that about a year later, in March 2021, there were reportedly approximately

117 million COVID-19 cases globally and a staggering 2.61 million total deaths in over 200 countries (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Mitchell, 2023). With the most recent pandemic being the “Spanish Flu” in the year 1918, another highly contagious virus, much of society, including organizational leadership, had not experienced the repercussions of the social effects of social distancing, hand washing, masking, and quarantining on society (Nair, 2021).

Initially, individuals started social distancing measures to help alleviate the transmission of COVID-19. The new concept of social distancing needed to be defined so that individuals would understand what they needed to do. Social distancing measures that WHO suggested were (a) stating that the entire population stays home if infected through self-isolation, (b) banning mass gatherings, in some cases with groups no more significant than five or ten people, (c) closing workplaces classified as non-essential and everyone (where possible) work from home, (d) closing all educational institutions for in-person learning, (e) forbidding non-essential travel, especially by plane, and (f) reducing or limiting contact with vulnerable populations in institutions such as nursing homes or hospitals (Douglas et al., 2020). These measures would slow the spread of the virus as the precautions would reduce the risk to the general population’s health by creating enough distance and isolation between people.

Leadership was immediately put in a situation to enforce the social distancing measures within their organizations (Brooks et al., 2020). The question remained on whether or not the general mental health of the individual employees who were abruptly put in the position to leave their routines in their face-to-face offices to work from home

in isolation was taken into consideration. Literature suggests that humans are naturally social, and mandating self-isolation could cause employees severe social and psychological risks (Brooks et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2020). Prolonged isolation increasingly aggravates the feelings that occur with forced isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Douglas et al., 2020). These feelings of fear of being infected, frustration, boredom within their own home, inadequate supplies or resources to do their work, lack of accurate information, financial loss, and stigma occur with all employees who were abruptly transitioned to virtual environments (Brooks et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2020). Leadership is confronted now with not only working through the transition from face-to-face teams to virtual teams but also adapting to the social changes that employees are going through as part of the process.

According to Rožman and Čančer (2022), they found that during COVID-19, employees who shifted into virtual environments from face-to-face environments placed less importance on their ability to make decisions in their roles but instead cared more about their sense of belonging to the group, as well as the level of their competency in their position (Rožman & Čančer, 2022). Leadership was challenged when working with individual situations as home life responsibilities differed from person to person. For example, families with elementary or high school children were pushed to learn remotely, leaving parents responsible for their positions at work and facilitating online learning for their children (Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022). The severity of the abrupt changes to society and how people continued to interact when adapting to the pandemic created changes that were unanticipated by many organizational leaders at the onset of the COVID-19

pandemic. Some of the risks with working from home included problems like knowledge sharing between employees, work intensification where individuals tend to work more than if they were in the office, collaboration obstruction as time and space can vary between employees, work-family conflict, especially for women, as COVID-19 drove children to attend school remotely needing assistance, as well as task-related stress, or lack of resources at home to perform tasks properly (Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022).

Making sure that individuals felt like they belonged to the team and that their work was valued, leadership guidance was imperative to ensuring the work environment was more conducive to individual employee requirements (Rožman & Čančer, 2022). Notably, this challenged local teams and was a concept that needed implementation for success. The same issue was happening globally and must be addressed for organizations to succeed (Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022). In many cases, COVID-19 drastically changed employees' work habits; the abrupt switch generated difficulties in adaptation for leadership, which continued to encourage this study (Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022). While health and its effects on society were enormous challenges for organizations, one of the most significant setbacks was the impact COVID-19 had on the economy.

The economic effects that COVID-19 had on the global economy were astronomical. According to the literature, to measure the health of the economy, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is calculated every quarter. The GDP can give an idea of what can be expected from the global economy (Mofijur et al., 2021). Using the GDP as a key performance indicator as the link between COVID-19 and the economic effects can be readily seen (Mofijur et al., 2021; Yamaka et al., 2022). While the relationship

between GDP and COVID-19 is nonlinear, some strong indicators indicate that COVID-19 decreased GDP due to the extraneous events that occurred in the economy simultaneously (Yamaka et al., 2022). The world was under siege as economies suffered under the measures taken to protect society and save lives (Mofijur et al., 2021).

With social distancing in place and organizations closing their doors to employees in person, drastic measures to alleviate the rapid spread of COVID-19 have led to the demise of the global economy (Mofijur et al., 2021; Yamaka et al., 2022). Disrupted supply chains led to lagging logistics for warehouses, alongside border closings, a reduction in leisure activities and in-person service industries, as well as significant industry challenges such as the grounding of 90% of all flights to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Mofijur et al., 2021). The forecasts of first-world countries with advanced economies were forecast to contract in 2020 (Mofijur et al., 2021). These included the contraction of economies such as the US by 5.9%, Japan by 5.4%, the UK by 6.5%, Germany by 7.0%, France by 7.2%, Italy by a leap of 9.1%, and lastly Spain by 8.0% (Mofijur et al., 2021). While China was the ONLY major economy to have a positive economic growth of 1.9% in 2020, the overall conclusion was that COVID-19 had a significantly negative impact on the global economy (Zhou et al., 2023). When examining the repercussions of countries or areas with a significant population density imposing lockdowns and slowing non-essential industries to a near halt, the abrupt impact COVID-19 had on the global economy can still be seen today (Yamaka et al., 2022). With the information forced upon the public, leadership found the situation challenging to adhere to the same leadership strategies that held fast pre-pandemic. The



following expands on the pre-existing leadership strategies that helped keep organizations running their daily operations.

### **Leadership Strategies Pre-Pandemic and the Relationship to Team Development**

The first thought that comes to mind when describing leadership is the word *hero*. With the catastrophic onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, good leadership could have meant the difference between life and death (Hahang et al., 2022). The role of a leader had become so influential in the business world that the definition is not justified. The focus on leadership pre-pandemic and post-pandemic can highlight many differences, as the latter has yet to be explored to the extent of the former (Hahang et al., 2022). The “new normal” developed for the post-pandemic business world has led to significant changes in how people work, with implications for leadership to adjust accordingly (Hahang et al., 2022; Karl et al., 2022). The following includes a broad definition of leadership pre-pandemic, Tuckman’s team development model, and the connection to leadership and leadership strategies.

According to Eddy et al. (2023), leadership is a multi-dimensional skill as described in their research. These dimensions are (a) position, responsibilities, and expertise; (b) initiating and enforcing change; (c) providing vision and shaping direction; (d) expertise and knowledge; (e) being respected as a leader; (f) fulfilling a greater mission, such as that of the college or organization; (g) empowering others; (h) me-centered approaches; (i) collaboration; and (j) influence, power, and authority (Eddy et al., 2023). Deriving from these dimensions, we can assume a definition of leadership to be a position of authority that provides a vision for a larger goal using their authority,

expertise, and knowledge while initiating change and inspiring employees through influence, empowerment, and collaboration (Eddy et al., 2023; Hahang et al., 2022; Super, 2020). Leadership can be closely tied to change as the only constant; as times change, problems change, and technology changes, the one thing that endures is the importance of leadership through change (Posner, 2020).

Leadership is an intricate skill developed over time. A leader takes a newly formed group of people and creates an atmosphere of collaboration and a common goal while becoming the expert in the subject matter for the subsequent development of talent (Super, 2020). The leadership of a team directly relates to the team development life cycle, and at each stage of the team development life cycle, a different type of leadership is needed (Super, 2020; Vaida & Şerban, 2021). The team development life cycle developed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965 proposed his initial take by presenting the four-stage team-development model (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Sokman et al., 2023; Vaida & Şerban, 2021).

Many scholars have utilized Tuckman's model and assisted in predicting individuals' behaviors in a team development situation (Sokman et al., 2023; Vaida & Şerban, 2021). These behaviors linked to the five stages in the team development life cycle proposed by Tuckman are as follows (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). The first four stages are forming, storming, norming, and performing, and a later addition to close out the cycle, adjourning (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Sokman et al., 2023; Vaida & Şerban, 2021). While these stages are widely known, the following definitions give an understanding of the link with leadership.

In the initial stage, forming, a group of people becomes a team, assigning a leader; these individuals may or may not need to be more familiar with each other (Kamaludin et al., 2022). The second stage, storming, relates to leaders struggling for authority and possibly causing friction in the group as not everyone may agree with the team's direction (Kamaludin et al., 2022). The third stage, norming, is where the atmosphere regulates as rules, roles, and processes toward the team's common goal become established and leadership acceptance settles in (Kamaludin et al., 2022). In the fourth stage, performing, the team is the most efficient in completing tasks and functioning highly through their processes (Kamaludin et al., 2022). To complete the cycle, the fifth stage that was added about a decade later by Tuckman, adjourning, has been defined as the closeout stage (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Vaida & Şerban, 2021). In the last stage, post-mortems take place, the performance of the team and leadership is measured, and an analysis of the completed goal (Kamaludin et al., 2022). The variances of the needs of a team in the different stages of the team development life cycle incite different leadership strategies, thus creating the challenge for the leaders to lead a team adequately.

The leadership strategies through the team development cycle depend on the ability to embrace innovation and leverage learning opportunities while at the same time allowing the team to function as an independent unit to ensure empowerment, cohesion, and job satisfaction (Super, 2020). Leadership strategies refer to a type of resource that, when used in an organization, releases the potential of a team to result in solutions to problems that are beneficial to the organization (Adoli & Kilika, 2020; Super, 2020).

Management offers direction and motivation to team members within a system while meeting the goals of an organization and using leadership strategies to accomplish success (Adoli & Kilika, 2020). When leaders consider team development stages, the leadership strategies change accordingly to accommodate the needs of the team at the development stage that they are currently functioning in (Adoli & Kilika, 2020; Kamaludin et al., 2022; Sokman et al., 2023; Super, 2020; Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Some examples of these leadership strategies closely tied to the team development stages are as follows.

### ***Forming***

Since this stage includes rudimentary interactions, the leadership strategies should include icebreakers, identification of the current situation, and an attempt to create trust within the team, as Kamaludin et al. (2022) mentioned. In a Super (2020) study, the initial stage includes high ambiguity and lack of direction. The expectation at this stage is that the members start by creating roles and assigning a leader, in most cases, a project manager (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Role assignment also allows the team members to create opinions of the other participants and what tasks to complete, as speculated by Vaida and Şerban (2021). In their study, Tuckman suggests that the behaviors found that individuals in this stage tend to be more polite as they assess the personality of peers and align with their personalities (Vaida & Şerban, 2021).

### ***Storming***

As the team continues to learn the personalities of the other members, conflict may arise as friction occurs through individual differences (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). The

leadership strategies at this stage should include focusing on team member diversity, celebrating opinions, identifying avenues for potential action, and ensuring individuals feel valued as roles and goals are established for everyone (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Super, 2020). The struggles at this stage relate to establishing leadership roles and working through the uncertainties of starting a project (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Some problems can arise with the team as collaboration, relationships, and emotions are involved in the decision-making (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Here, Tuckman suggests that there is a power struggle between participants, and due to the questioning of leadership, there can be more conflict or arguments as the team structure develops (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Vaida & Şerban, 2021).

### ***Norming***

At this stage, the team members understand their roles, there is a more stabilized team environment, and a sense of togetherness starts to develop (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Leaders may feel comfortable using leadership strategies that establish processes at this stage (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Leadership starts defining tasks for everyone in line with their abilities, capacity, and personality and develops team member interactions to encourage knowledge sharing (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Super, 2020). Tuckman suggests that at this stage, the possibility of a more balanced team dynamic appears as individuals settle into their roles and the focus moves to work together rather than a power struggle (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). The development of trust within the team is essential to establishing effective leadership and is imperative at this stage for team cohesiveness (Vaida & Şerban, 2021).

### ***Performing***

At this point in the team development life cycle, the team will be established and cooperate at a high-efficiency level to accomplish goals (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Leadership strategies appropriate for this stage include displaying motivation and commitment to teamwork, maintaining trust and psychological safety, continuing communication, and coordination among members (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Team sharing experiences, learnings, solutions, and difficulties at this stage are essential to maintain trust (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Super, 2020). The bulk of the task work is finalized and completed at this stage, allowing team members to feel the excitement of accomplishment (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). This stage is also one of the longest stages in the timeline for team development, where intimacy and maturity are the core development words to cultivate self-management and discipline to complete tasks (Vaida & Şerban, 2021).

### ***Adjourning***

The final stage in the team development life cycle is where the team closes off their relationships with the other team members, and the operation dissolves (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). At this point, leadership should use strategies to cultivate a no-blame culture and learn from failure, encouraging team members to look at the outcomes (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Super, 2020). The purpose is to develop improved processes, diagnose deficiencies, and identify weaknesses so future teams can benefit from the learnings (Kamaludin et al., 2022; Super, 2020). This stage is also known as the termination stage, as the team completes the purpose and then disassembles, moving on

from the current stage as the teamwork is no longer the focus (Vaida & Şerban, 2021).

The result can be that the team members acknowledge their accomplishments together and celebrate the completion of their project(s) (Vaida & Şerban, 2021). Tuckman's team development life cycle, therefore, comes to an end at this final stage.

Putting the team development life cycle together with specific leadership strategies at each stage can create a more exact science for leadership to manage teams. Since the goal of the team should align with the company's goals, the strategy should be to identify the opportunities for the team and defend them against any potential threats to their success at every stage of the team development life cycle (Super, 2020; Vaida & Şerban, 2021). The leadership objective is to achieve processes that allow operations to run smoothly within an organization to meet the company's mission and goals (Super, 2020). The leadership strategies listed here were developed through observation and experiences with in-person teams (Adoli & Kilika, 2020; Kamaludin et al., 2022; Sokman et al., 2023; Super, 2020). COVID-19 sidetracked all in-person team development processes by causing organizations to force their employees to work from home for their health and safety (Hahang et al., 2022). The new environment for employees created the number one leadership issue: communication. Face-to-face communication dissolved almost overnight, and leadership had to adapt abruptly to the situation to continue business as usual (Mofijur et al., 2021; Stocker et al., 2023). The following dives into a description of communication and how the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted typical interaction between leadership and employees.

## **Communication in the Workplace pre-pandemic**

Communication in the workplace is the ability for successful and meaningful interaction between parties and is determined by how accurately individuals can understand each other and respond accordingly (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). In an organization, success is not only determined by monetary gain; communication is imperative to the measurement of the success of the business (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). According to Ahmad and Chowdhury (2022), the exchange of quality information and decision-making defines how accurate the communication is between parties. If knowledge sharing fails and information is riddled with biases and assumptions or is fundamentally faulty, leadership collapses, and proper decision-making cannot occur (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2022). The following will expand the definition of communication elements in the workplace pre-pandemic between leaders and the individuals who make up their teams.

Different types of communication make up how humans interact. These are verbal, both in the words used and the inflections of the tone, and non-verbal communication (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2022; Spence, 2020). Starting with the basics of human communication, Dr. Mehrabian introduces the elements of communication (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). Dr. Mehrabian's study done in the 1960s consisted of three parts in his 7, 38, and 55 model (Sharma & Tamta, 2020; Spence, 2020). These three parts involved when the subjects in his research reacted to nine recorded words, three conveying words of liking, three conveying neutrality, and three conveying disliking, and then asked the subjects to describe the emotions behind the different words (Sharma &



Tamta, 2020). These words work with the sounds and pictures and the variation in the communication's tonal sounds (Sharma & Tamta, 2020).

According to Dr. Mehrabian, the results of the ratios worked out that Total Liking was equivalent to 7% Verbal Liking, plus 38% Vocal Liking and 55% Facial Liking to represent communication between parties (Sharma & Tamta, 2020; Spence, 2020). The simple breakdown of communication, according to the discoveries of Dr. Mehrabian in his communication model, starts with the words used when speaking, accounting for 7% of communication, then the voice with changes in volume, tone, and intonation at 38%, and non-verbal or physical cues at 55% (Sharma & Tamta, 2020; Spence, 2020). Consequently, exploring communication would continue with a deeper dive into verbal and non-verbal communication before the pandemic and the issues COVID-19 created.

Communication exchange between two individuals refers to the sender who conveys the message and the intended receiver (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). The fundamentals are the same in verbal, non-verbal, or written communication, as there is a sender and receiver of information (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). In-person communication includes both verbal and non-verbal cues for interaction. For clarity throughout this paper in describing the differences in communication, face-to-face communication will be considered in-person communication as opposed to non-verbal digital communication utilized with virtual teams. Non-verbal communication in the workplace includes the exchange of information between participants through a digital channel or medium, which can be emails, text messages, voicemails, notes, instant messenger (Teams, Skype, and other instant messaging platforms), and any other electronic stream deemed

necessary for information exchange (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). Spoken conversation fundamentally differs from written formal communication, such as electronic communication, which tends to be more matter-of-fact and creates a paper trail (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). The elements of speech besides words add to communication through intonation, speaking speed, pauses and sighs, facial expressions, and personal appearances (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). Pre-pandemic, the essentials of communication for a leader meant that they must be cognizant of verbal, non-verbal, and written communication when interacting with the individuals on their team.

Noting that communication is the interaction between two parties, whether verbal, non-verbal, or written, where the intent is to convey information to perform tasks for a goal, one final obstacle for leadership relates to the specific individual receiving the Communication (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2022). The individual's personality traits, morals, ethics and values, the culture they embrace, their generational era, and even gender differences all contribute to how an individual communicates (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2022; Martín-Raugh et al., 2023). Briefly touching on these elements that influence how an individual communicates can provide a better understanding of why in-person communication differs from online communication.

Personality describes an individual's characteristic manner of thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating to others (Gottlieb & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2020). These enduring characteristics of an individual that stabilize over time are often associated with their personality and can influence their level of success in academics and careers (Martín-Raugh et al., 2023). Costa and McCrae's Five-Factor Model of Personality introduces

personality traits that are directly related to how someone communicates in a business setting (Gottlieb & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2020; Martín-Raugh et al., 2023; Sutin et al., 2022).

The notoriously studied five personality traits found in this model are openness to conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism/ negativity (Gottlieb & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2020; Martín-Raugh et al., 2023; Sutin et al., 2022).

The following examples can help clarify the reason for the identification of team members. For example, suppose someone on the team is an individual who displays extraversion. In that case, they may possess sub-traits such as warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, and positive emotions, can be excitement-seeking, and can be associated with the ability to communicate (Gottlieb & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2020; Sutin et al., 2022). Conversely, an individual on the team who displays conscientiousness, having sub-traits such as self-discipline, competence, dutifulness, and deliberation, may tend to be more reserved with their communication (Gottlieb & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2020; Sutin et al., 2022). Literature has shown that individuals who tend to be more extroverted were also significantly more acutely aware of the meaning of non-verbal communication than their introverted counterparts (Martín-Raugh et al., 2023). As leaders learn the differences between these personality traits, they can better adapt their communication methods and leadership depending on the individual members of their team.

Another factor influencing communication between leaders and team members is that each person possesses their innate morals, ethics, and values (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Greene & Kirton, 2024). When considering the difference between these, ethics are the rules that govern an individual's behavior, established by a group or culture, and assist in

deciding what is morally correct or incorrect in each situation (Al Halbusi et al., 2021).

At the same time, values refer to the beliefs a person has an enduring preference for and what they would like to do or achieve (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Greene & Kirton, 2024).

These ethics and values are influential for everyone involved in a business setting, and a lot of the time, can be subconscious or unknown to the participants. According to Greene and Kirton (2024), in their study about ethical values manifesting in the workplace, some individuals were conscious that their ethical values motivated them and permeated their decision-making. Al Halbusi et al. (2021) also noted that in their research, ethical leadership builds an ethical climate that would encourage more positive ethical behavior from employees. Understanding morals is also essential to measuring ethical behavior (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). Considering ethics and values, defining morality or morals in the workplace is essential for developing appropriate leadership skills.

Morals are the elements an individual associates with doing the right thing or making a difference. They are integral to their personal and professional identity (Greene & Kirton, 2024). Paying attention to morals, deemed moral attentiveness, is a trait that an individual can possess, which ranks their ability to perceive moral matters at a higher level in the daily routines of a workplace environment (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). The personality trait of morality, as with the personality traits mentioned previously, can differ between individuals at a varying level and create a different outcome for different people within a workplace (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). When a leader considers their employees' moral compasses, they can differ from person to person simply due to that individual's morals, ethics, and values. Bringing this to the forefront, a leader should

consider communication that does not go against a team member's morals, ethics, and values, which can inherently influence how the individual responds.

When speaking to culture in general, according to Hofstede, culture plays a significant role in how individuals form their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, and culture works as psychological programming for individuals (Capece & Di Pillo, 2023). The challenge is associating communication with culture and the individual since there is no universal way to determine behavior (Capece & Di Pillo, 2023). When an organization functions in a country with a pure culture atmosphere, culture is understood among employees regardless of the hierarchy (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). When working in a culturally diverse organization, where individuals embrace two or more cultures, culture becomes another element of an individual's personality that can influence communication (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). The influence comes in the form of how the individual conveys information, whether verbal, non-verbal, or written, and what the influence means to them concerning their cultural background (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020).

One model introduced by Hofstede is the cultural model (Capece & Di Pillo, 2023). The model was generated by comparing national cultures on a large scale and then attempting to determine similarities and differences to group the identifying dimensions according to Hofstede (Capece & Di Pillo, 2023). The dimensions in Hofstede's cultural model include power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation (Capece & Di Pillo, 2023). As a brief introduction to these dimensions, the following reflects the definitions found in the literature. The power distance dimension is the degree to which there are social inequalities in the culture, the

individualism dimension is the intention only to take care of self and immediate family, the masculinity dimension refers to masculine traits of leadership, assertiveness, and material success (where the opposite, femininity is more socialist, taking care of the masses), the uncertainty avoidance dimension is the extent to which the community can be uncomfortable with ambiguity in their community, and lastly the long-term orientation dimension speaks to how the culture holds on to the past, adjusts for the present and how innovative they are when thinking about the future (Capece & Di Pillo, 2023). Taking Hofstede's cultural dimensions into consideration adds another unique factor leadership needs to consider when communicating with their team.

Another component of the individual team member when considering communication directly relates to their generational era (Stark & McElfresh, 2020). While overall communication is necessary for the success of a business, intergenerational communication is also a factor for leadership to consider (Guptill et al., 2023; Stark & McElfresh, 2020). Defined as the interaction between individuals who belong to different generations, intergenerational communication has brought forth awareness of how individuals in different generations interact (Guptill et al., 2023; Stark & McElfresh, 2020). Four generations, or groups of individuals born and living contemporaneously, found in the working force, are called generations (Guptill et al., 2023). Collectively, these groups share a culture, beliefs, and specific behaviors that classify them as part of a generational era (Guptill et al., 2023; Stark & McElfresh, 2020).

What is important to note and why leadership needs to be able to identify generations is that on average, two generations can co-exist for about 50 years, and to

expand that, three generations probably share only about 30 years (Grønning, 2021). This is the time when generations can interact and becoming an expert in intergenerational communication becomes an asset as a leadership skill. To quickly touch on each one of these existing generations in the workforce, the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, the following gives a short description of each (Guptill et al., 2023; Stark & McElfresh, 2020).

Individuals of the Silent Generation, or traditionalists, were born between 1925 and 1945, living in the post-WWII and Great Depression, drawing their influences from that time and making up less than 2% of the workforce (Guptill et al., 2023). The Baby Boomers, born between 1945 and 1964, tend to be workaholics for advancement, but unlike the traditionalists, they rebel against authority (Guptill et al., 2023). Those included in Generation X, born between 1964 and 1980, tend to be more independent, challenging authority, and have a more relaxed approach to the work environment (Grønning, 2021; Guptill et al., 2023). Millennials, otherwise known as Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2000, have seen many different ongoing threats of terrorism, including 9/11, tend to be more globally aware, locked in with technology, seek more flexibility in the workplace, have less job loyalty and have issues with face-to-face interaction (Grønning, 2021; Guptill et al., 2023; Stark & McElfresh, 2020).

Lastly, Generation Z, who are still new in the working world, include anyone born in 2000 onward, have more idealistic views on life, and care more about the world than the workforce (Guptill et al., 2023; Stark & McElfresh, 2020). The characteristics of these generations are different enough to confuse when communication arises, especially for

leadership trying to bridge the generational gap in the workforce (Guptill et al., 2023; Stark & McElfresh, 2020). Leadership must consider the generational era of the individuals on their team to communicate efficiently.

Considering differences in the individual, the knowledge that even on a biological level, team members will have communication tendencies is necessary (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). In this paper, noting that gender is not dichotomous when speaking of gender, the most common groups spoken about are men and women (Briggs et al., 2023). As leadership tries to avoid stereotypes, communication patterns and styles differ among genders; the expectation can still be part of different individuals (Briggs et al., 2023). For example, through consensus, men are seen to be more assertive and are stereotypically viewed as influential in decision-making in critical situations (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). The idea that men are logical, are better at monologues, and come across as more authoritative is conversely noted as women have the edge in more collaborative environments or dialogues, where warm body language, listening skills, and empathy are valued (Briggs et al., 2023; Getchell & Lentz, 2020; Sharma & Tamta, 2020). The point of business communication is for the team to complete a task, accomplish their business goals, or gather information for decision-making, so considering gender is vital for leadership (Getchell & Lentz, 2020).

One of the most critical aspects of communication for leaders is to avoid biases and give voice to all team members (Getchell & Lentz, 2020). The concept of voice recognition occurs when leadership judges how much to acknowledge the pattern of discretionary input they have received from each of their employees, including between



men and women (Getchell & Lentz, 2020; Sharma & Tamta, 2020). Creating an atmosphere that includes a non-biased, non-sexist, neutral environment for all genders to communicate is still a delicate balance for leadership in a face-to-face team and can be another sensitive topic for leadership to consider (Briggs et al., 2023; Getchell & Lentz, 2020). As COVID-19 subjected the world to unprecedented circumstances, the pandemic complicated how leadership communicated with team members, even among men and women, where more virtual teams became common practice.

### **Face-to-face Teams vs Virtual Teams**

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most influential digital transformations in the global workforce, disconnecting and connecting people in new ways (Chai & Park, 2022). Businesses before the COVID-19 pandemic were slowly moving away from traditional face-to-face teams and starting to expand into teams that could work collaboratively in a digital environment (Chai & Park, 2022). Organizations were able to accelerate the rate at which they implemented virtual teams by improving their technologies, communication mediums, and information-sharing processes (Chai & Park, 2022). Pre-COVID-19, according to the study by Tagliaro and Migliore (2022), an average of about 35% to 45% of workers in the United States and the EU-28 occasionally worked remotely, whether in their own home or a public space with available internet access. Currently, there is no set number of people who work in virtual teams as the adoption of remote work still varies country by country (Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022). Another study done by Wheatly and Gifford (2109) in the UK found that two-thirds of workers wanted the flexibility to work in at least one way that was not currently available

to them, stating that about 49% of employees wanted the choice to work from home or in a virtual team (Gifford, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic allowed employees to experience the differences between working virtually and in-person (Gifford, 2022). The following expands on the pros and cons of face-to-face teams versus virtual teams for both leadership and team members.

Face-to-face teams are traditional teams where individuals are collocated and work alongside their co-workers (Gera et al., 2013; Kahlow et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, these types of teams typically have individuals who work in the same building, making in-person interaction more possible, including spontaneous interaction between scheduled meetings throughout the workday (Gera et al., 2013). Pre-pandemic, this was the norm for most organizations, with less than half of individuals working remotely (Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022). When defining virtual teams, according to Dulebohn and Hoch, the term refers to a group of individuals forming a team that is in different geographical areas, has little to no in-person interactions, and performs their goals and objectives as a team interdependently using various forms of technology and the internet for collaboration (Zeuge et al., 2020). With the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual teams increased as lockdown constraints ensued to decrease the spread of the virus (Chai & Park, 2022). The result was the need for organizations to coordinate work responsibilities in different time zones, spaces, and locations in an abrupt timeline for leadership (Chai & Park, 2022).

Literature highlights four critical differences between face-to-face and virtual teams before the COVID-19 pandemic (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020;

Mitchell, 2023). These differences include the pros and cons of speed, costs, efficiency, and human presence (Kahlow et al., 2020). Regarding speed, virtual teams reduce the time employees travel to reach a location to attend work in person or meetings (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020). A face-to-face team would need to include travel time, time for booking a room or location, time for coordinating schedules, and even time for organizing refreshments (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020). The costs associated with face-to-face teams can include the expense of leasing an office location or external location, the cost of travel to a collocated location, or associated costs for comfort during the interaction, such as food or entertainment (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020). With virtual teams, there is a reduced cost for travel, but due to the nature of the work, there can be an increased cost for technology as each employee needs adequate working equipment to participate virtually (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2023).

Efficiency is another factor influenced by the type of team structure (Kahlow et al., 2020). In a face-to-face team environment, there can be more casual interaction, prolonging meetings and potentially making them less efficient (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020). A virtual team may be more structured as meetings follow an agenda, work in time management programs can be tracked, and documented communication leaves little room for idle banter or water cooler conversation (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020). The last key difference is that the human connection or presence can play a prominent role in a team's success, whether face-to-face or virtual (Chai & Park, 2022; Kahlow et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2023).

As a professional in face-to-face teams, Dr. Mehrabian's communication model can be adhered to, where individuals communicate using the 7, 38, and 55 model without losing any of the elements of verbal and non-verbal Communication (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). A virtual team with less in-person interaction would differ as the reduced social or human presence in many collaborative team settings leads to differences in group interactions and outcomes (Kahlow et al., 2020). Assuming that communication with less human presence would have worse interactions than communication with more human presence (Kahlow et al., 2020). Virtual teams using technology spend most of their day relying on communication through collaboration technologies because they need more human presence (Kahlow et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2023).

In the case of COVID-19, collaboration was forced into a virtual environment, leaving leadership and employees in face-to-face teams needing to adapt abruptly and explore collaboration technology during a crisis (Mitchell, 2023). The regular business-as-usual tasks needed to transition into an online space, and organizations were required to maintain and improve collaboration technology during and post-pandemic, which was imperative (Mitchell, 2023). These abrupt changes that were taking place in organizations created dilemmas for leadership, as leading an in-person team was no longer the main issue. As COVID-19 continued through not one but almost two years of on and off lockdowns for countries, more variables were presented from the abrupt transition from face-to-face teams to virtual teams (Hahang et al., 2022). To expand on these dilemmas and how they affect leadership and teams, the following presents the work from home situation at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **The Leadership Dilemma as Work from Home (WFH) was abruptly driven by COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic marked the beginning of a new era for businesses, creating a shift in the perception of what “work” looked like for many organizations (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Stocker et al., 2023). Work was no longer a brick-and-mortar in-person location where people needed to gather; instead, work became a digital environment as the pandemic ensued in 2020 (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). WHO recommended restrictions for the general population’s health and safety, forcing entire countries into lockdown, which allowed only essential businesses to function in person (Stocker et al., 2023). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the impact of COVID-19 effectively put 2.7 billion workers in a partial or complete lockdown situation (AlZaabi et al., 2021). Fundamental to sustainable development, leadership faced the social and economic crisis that accompanied COVID-19 and impacted their employees (Mofijur et al., 2021; Stocker et al., 2023). Unlike any other crisis leadership faced before COVID-19, the element of rapid change alongside many unforeseen hurdles became prominent (AlZaabi et al., 2021). The following highlights some dilemmas leadership faced when transitioning from face-to-face to virtual teams.

The first and most apparent overarching dilemma for leadership is changing from face-to-face teams to virtual teams (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021; Kukyte & Jasinskas, 2021; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). The most crucial difference is that before COVID-19, work from home was typically used by employees who preferred to work remotely (Kniffin et al., 2021). In contrast, mandatory work from home forced

employees into a virtual environment, making their experiences challenging to generalize from prior studies (Kniffin et al., 2021). The different challenges presented to organizations and leadership were the immediate change in the way team members communicate, team member engagement and responsiveness, lack of technology infrastructure, while upholding the three critical aspects of a successful team; productivity, motivation, and trust (Kniffin et al., 2021; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). The first vital dilemma to discuss is the communication between team members as leadership addresses the abrupt changes to face-to-face teams that came about with the COVID-19 pandemic (Mitchell, 2023).

Referring to Dr. Mehrabian's communication model, the explanation of the series of behaviors that happens when there is a spoken conversation between people include the use of verbal and non-verbal communication where the assumption is 7% spoken, 38% in tone, intonation, and volume, and lastly 55% in body language (Sharma & Tamta, 2020). Unlike face-to-face team communication, the newly formed virtual teams needed to immediately implement the increased use of written formal communication such as emails, memos, texts, and reports, and in some cases, expanded to the use of telephone calls and videoconferencing (Sharma & Tamta, 2020; Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). While cutting out face-to-face communication was not optional, increased written communication was necessary for organizations to continue doing business (Sharma & Tamta, 2020; Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). The new dilemma for leadership was adapting to working with individuals abruptly forced into virtual teams. Digital communication for business as usual is necessary, but employees new to the virtual team environment must

be cautious when drafting written communication, as reckless writing creates only confusion and chaos (Sharma & Tamta, 2020; Yusof & Rahmat, 2020).

Miscommunication in a digital environment can be disastrous since miscommunication creates an atmosphere where work is executed incorrectly, leading to delays and problems with task or project completion (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020).

The problems with miscommunication can lead to a decrease in team member engagement and responsiveness, creating another dilemma for leadership (Kniffin et al., 2021; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). Traditional or face-to-face team management methods do not entirely transfer over when working with virtual teams (Kniffin et al., 2021; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). One significant dilemma for team engagement and responsiveness is the psychological well-being of employees as these abrupt changes occur (Chai & Park, 2022). If an employee is not in a state of psychological well-being, there could be a lack of social interactions and less productivity (Chai & Park, 2022). They may also feel they have less control over their lives, may be less inclined to receive feedback, or may have lowered mental and physical health (Chai & Park, 2022). The importance of the psychological well-being of employees is directly related to their engagement and responsiveness, as a positive work environment can increase their commitment to the organization, their feelings of job performance and satisfaction, and their ability to manage an adequate work-life balance (Chai & Park, 2022).

As COVID-19 created unexpected virtual teams for employees, the challenge became taking on multiple roles, balancing work-life with blurred boundaries, navigating team dynamics in a less interactive team, and possibly working longer hours due to the

adaptation needed for a virtual team (Chai & Park). COVID-19 forced leadership to establish structure, work with employees to outline the common goals and team vision, and coordinate knowledge sharing for the tasks needed to be successful in the virtual team (Kniffin et al., 2021; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). Management needed to be always present for constant team awareness support, learn the subtleties of informal communication in a virtual environment, and increase their emotional intelligence to identify when employees were sharing social and emotional cues (Kniffin et al., 2021; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). There was no easy answer to solve the decrease in team member engagement and responsiveness, which pressured leadership to maintain business as usual for the organization.

Another unexpected dilemma was the lack of technological infrastructure (Kahlow et al., 2020). At the inception of COVID-19, organizations needed a combination of technology, tools, and infrastructure to make work possible for virtual teams as if they were co-located (Kahlow et al., 2020; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). The influence of communication technologies and infrastructure on a virtual team is essential to enable an organization to be successful (Kahlow et al., 2020; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). Employees cannot fulfill their job requirements if they do not have a laptop, internet, or a space to work in a virtual team (Kahlow et al., 2020; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). Many organizations found themselves in this dilemma as the leadership had to adapt and wait until they could provide proper support through technological infrastructure for their teams to perform (Kahlow et al., 2020; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). Not only is the virtual team environment threatened by technological failures, but the



team also needs technology to be updated so that they can perform their work independently, supporting team member collaboration and problem-solving for the group (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021).

The last major dilemma is maintaining the three critical aspects of a successful team: productivity, motivation, and trust (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Setyanitami et al., 2023). As mentioned, team functions in face-to-face teams take on the traditional team characteristics, which include the team members being collocated, allowing for face-to-face communication. This leads to a higher opportunity for knowledge sharing and interaction, which leads to solid coordination, engagement, and commitment, allowing for effective collaboration and feedback (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Setyanitami et al., 2023). Team functions in virtual teams are almost the exact opposite, with team members who communicate digitally from different locations having less engagement and commitment, lowered collaboration, and feedback, with nearly a complete loss in any social or informal interaction (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Setyanitami et al., 2023). The challenge for leadership was to uphold the team's productivity while motivating them and building trust in an unexpected shift from face-to-face teams to virtual teams.

Due to the nature of virtual teams, leadership faces the dilemma of attempting to create an environment like traditional or face-to-face teams (Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). Maintaining productivity was one of the most critical deliverables for their immediate team leadership when COVID-19 hit (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Greimel et al., 2023; Setyanitami et al., 2023). According to AlZaabi et al. (2021), the abrupt transition from face-to-face to virtual teams may have impacted productivity during the COVID-19

pandemic. Essentially, productivity did not decrease by a noticeable amount. Since virtuality is a virtual team's main characteristic, team members rely on information and communication technologies, and productivity can be tracked and recorded in real-time (Greimel et al., 2023). The biggest struggle for virtual team members was apparent in individuals who were part of older generations since their weaknesses were more prominent when they needed to depend more on technology than on face-to-face teams, which could affect their productivity (AlZaabi et al., 2021). Overall, the abrupt transition may have only incrementally decreased productivity for virtual teams as the COVID-19 pandemic became more accepted by team members as time passed (AlZaabi et al., 2021).

Motivation is another crucial element in ensuring teams function at their highest capacity (Doblinger, 2022). Learning about motivation can help leaders create a more comprehensive working environment for their teams (Aljumah, 2023; Doblinger, 2022). According to a study by Aljumah (2023), leadership can utilize two types of motivation. The first type is extrinsic motivation, which in a workplace can include individual compensation satisfaction and performance-based incentives (Aljumah, 2023; Doblinger, 2022). Doblinger (2022) expands on extrinsic motivation as affiliation motivation, suggesting that employees will perform for social rewards. The examples given to promote extrinsic motivation in some individuals maintain that they are people pleasers, seeking approval from leadership and peers, prioritizing personal relations and communication over task-related outcomes (Doblinger, 2022).

The second type of motivation is intrinsic motivation, including employee empowerment and recognition (Aljumah, 2023; Doblinger, 2022). Doblinger (2022)

expanded on intrinsic motivation, identifying the term as individual achievement motivation. The definition is when employees take pride in their work, pushing to meet goals fervently (Doblinger, 2022). The tendency is for individuals to be more achievement-oriented, with their teammates acknowledging that the individual has a higher rate of contribution, competence, and confidence (Doblinger, 2022). Leaders must continue strengthening their skills by taking on honesty with team members, providing positive reinforcement for the group when meeting deadlines, spreading motivation, and empowering emerging leaders (Doblinger, 2022). In an organization where policies or regulations ensure a safe environment for team members, the atmosphere can assist leadership in improving intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Aljumah, 2023; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021).

According to Setyanitami et al. (2023), the abrupt change from face-to-face teams to virtual teams affected team dynamics. The one major issue that leadership struggled to maintain was trust (Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021; Setyanitami et al., 2023). Trust in a team setting encourages collaboration and knowledge sharing, reduces turnover, improves company morale, promotes a strong organizational culture, and essentially fosters a robust positive element for success at work (Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021; Setyanitami et al., 2023). Without body language, trust became challenging to develop in a virtual team environment, as there was a lack of confirming non-verbal cues to support individual intentions in communication (Setyanitami et al., 2023). The problem with a lack of trust in communication within a team creates compounded issues as the tasks of deliverables with different individuals are interdependent (Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021; Setyanitami et

al., 2023). When there are not adequate amounts of face-to-face communication, coordination among team members becomes difficult, decreasing trust, as there is a lack of clarity in their roles (Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). The question, therefore, remains: what strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face to virtual teams?

### **Organizational Change and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The new work environment changes brought about by COVID-19 reflect the changes to environments already being seen as the working world changes. For example, many great revolutions have changed how leaders implement strategies in work environments (Preston, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). The digital revolution, or the information and telecommunications revolution, is no exception between 1980 and the present (Arfiansyah & Han, 2021; Preston, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). What is different for leadership regarding organizational change with the COVID-19 pandemic? Possibly, any experience organizations had with crisis management before COVID-19 could never prepare them for the impact that COVID-19 had on the global socio-economic atmosphere (Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). The following conversation on organizational change alongside Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory helps explain the need for abrupt organizational change to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023).

Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory is used very often when describing change at an organizational level. Rogers' theory explains how an idea or innovative change will gain popularity in an organization and eventually assimilate into the

organization's culture if accepted by the teams (Rawson & Davis, 2023). The theory introduces five factors perceived as innovation: Relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023).

To briefly expand on these five factors, the first factor of relative advantage describes considering if the innovation or change will create a more beneficial and prosperous environment compared to the current situation (Rawson & Davis, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). With COVID-19, the relative advantage for organizations to abruptly change from face-to-face to virtual environments far outweighed the risk of employees interacting in the workplace (Mitchell, 2023; Preston, 2023). The second is compatibility if the innovation or change can work within the organization's values, status quo, and what is needed (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). As organizations shifted to virtual teams, the ability to uphold the health and safety of their employees allowed them to continue business functions, meeting business goals while still considering the people who worked for them (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). The third factor is complexity, with the knowledge that change can be smoother to incorporate if the change is more straightforward on the scale of difficulty, and the opposite is difficult to implement if the change or innovation is too complex (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). For organizations shifting into virtual environments, there was a scalable level of efficiency depending on the technological infrastructure level (Kahlow et al., 2020; Kukytė & Jasinskis, 2021). The fourth factor, trialability, is figuring out the change through small trials to see if the organization can implement the change (Rawson & Davis, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). With COVID-19, the instantaneous need for transitioning into virtual teams did

not allow this trial-and-error period (Kahlow et al., 2020; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). The fifth factor, observability, was like a post-mortem for any organizational change implementation (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). Since COVID-19 did not come with any warning, there was very little that organizations could do to get in terms of stakeholder buy-in, and jumping into a new innovative change without knowing the results was not standard practice for many organizations (Preston, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023).

According to Preston (2023), the organizational change process is like Rogers' five factors influencing innovation diffusion, but they suggest only three states: present, transitional, and future. While the three states oversimplify the process presented by Rogers, they cover the same experience an organization has with change management (Preston, 2023). When expanding on the organizational change process, speaking about how an organization can adapt to change is the most critical state for success in the future (Preston, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). At this stage, the organization must consciously identify, train, and educate the employees directly influenced by the change to be prepared to maintain or improve their status in the organization's future state (Preston, 2023).

The result of leadership having to go through dramatically rapid organizational change to accommodate the COVID-19 pandemic increased the levels of uncertainty with decision-making and routine business-as-usual processes (Rawson & Davis, 2023). The uncertainty stemmed from not experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in any previous crisis management situation (Preston, 2023; Rawson & Davis, 2023). Organizations had the opportunities in the past to leverage many different parts of change

models to find solutions to the problems the organization was facing (Rawson & Davis, 2023). Although Roger's diffusion of innovation theory brings together the five factors of change in a congruent and organized manner, COVID-19 did not allow for the same seamless process (Preston, 2023). The fast changes from face-to-face environments abruptly into virtual environments pushed the limits of the capabilities of organizations (Preston, 2023; Rawson & Davis, 2023). Preston (2023) explicitly and pointedly explains that organizational change needs to happen rapidly. Many unknown factors came along with the COVID-19 pandemic at lightning speed, and organizations needed to accept that the world had changed and the unprecedented times brought challenges to everyone, leaving normalcy at the door of 2020 (Preston, 2023; Rawson & Davis, 2023). The fundamental and only constant for organizations after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic were the effects of immediate change, implementing change for employees in forced, abrupt virtual teams, and the new leadership challenges (Preston, 2023; Rawson & Davis, 2023).

### **Leadership Approach to Team Adaptation in the Face of COVID-19**

Taking the information from the previous explanation of organizational change and using the definition of implementation of change, leadership needed to embrace what COVID-19 did to their traditional change management processes (Rawson & Davis, 2023). In many instances of change, before COVID-19 occurred, there was a deep focus on the aspects of the change, if the innovation was required, and the ability to move through a lengthy timeline with careful change management (Rawson & Davis, 2023). Looking to Rogers for some answers on the types of employees and their ability to adopt

change, there were five adopter categories based on how fast individuals would adapt to the changes implemented. The following expands on leadership approaches to team adaptation and individual ability to adapt to change amid COVID-19.

Leaders who know that individuals will embrace and conform to change at different rates and in different ways can utilize this knowledge for a positive implementation climate (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). Leaders who create a sense of deep purpose for their teams can push the limits for performance goals and ambitions (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). According to recent studies, these leaders can create team cohesiveness by involving employees in establishing meaningful and purposeful attainable goals (Rawson & Davis, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). The success of any change implementation in an organization stems solely from the leaders' performance and ability to create the restructure, lead employees step-by-step through the change, and encourage them to move forward with the improvements (Preston, 2023).

The stages of change for employees differ slightly from the organizational change process (Preston, 2023). For employees, these three stages include what they perceive as the old, transformation, and new reality (Preston, 2023). These stages of change before COVID-19 would be able to follow a timeline and be malleable for employees to become comfortable with the proposed change (Preston, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). COVID-19 completely altered how leadership could control the cadence of change and was in the same state of shock as employees when fumbling through those first years of chaos (Preston, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). Teams needed to evaluate their processes as everyone had their circumstances when dealing with the socio-economic



change that COVID-19 unleashed (Preston, 2023; Rawson & Davis, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). Considering the new team development stages in which employees were involved may have assisted leadership in approaching change for team adaptation. (Meng et al., 2023).

Team adaptation refers to a team's recognition of an urgent environmental change that directly affects the team and the results of these changes (Meng et al., 2023). A team's performance can depend on the leadership and their ability to trickle down to their values, culture, and morale (Meng et al., 2023). Team adaptation is more successful in an atmosphere where the training of interdisciplinary teams and their leaders should include a variety of situations that can affect the team and maintain a focus on team processes and adaptive team skills (Tschan et al., 2019). Teams that can act efficiently, especially in instances of crisis like COVID-19, have a high profile for team adaptability (Tschan et al., 2019). The team members in the COVID-19 situation needed to adopt innovations quickly to continue business operations (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). Referring to Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory, he identifies five adaptation groups or categories that individuals fall under (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023).

The five categories are rooted in how quickly an individual can adopt a change in the organization. The first group is labeled innovators who find change exciting and try something new without knowing the consequences or the final goal (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). Early adopters are second as the group who would be quick to adopt a new change but are slightly weary of the downside of new ideas (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). The third group is the early majority, which needs more time to decide on the

innovation and whether the change will work for their best interests (Rawson & Davis, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023).

The late majority are fourth and tend to be skeptical about change, questioning more than the previous groups (Rawson & Davis, 2023; Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). The last group, or the laggards, are averse to change and need help to keep up with the rest of the group (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023). With the knowledge of the different types of adopters in a team, there is a need for organizations to focus on promoting a learning culture, helping employees to adapt and respond to any change or external challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic (Blaique et al., 2023). The last primary consideration for leadership when working with teams for adaptation is the psychological influence of COVID-19 and the global public health crisis (Blaique et al., 2023).

Employees are people with real emotions, families, and social lives outside of the teams within an organization (Blaique et al., 2023). They were living through a pandemic that mentally and physically affected individuals. One challenge for leadership was dealing with the emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Caffrey, 2024). Empathy or emotional intelligence skills have emerged as influential leadership expertise to support the need for psychological safety in the workplace (Caffrey, 2024). When leaders display an empathetic and ethical image, staff display a sense of being cared for and trusted, promoting positive work outcomes. (Meng et al., 2023). Leadership who experienced COVID-19 needed to possess the ability to respond to the needs and challenges of their team members and their circumstances (Caffrey, 2024). Many virtual teams lost the ability to create levels of safety and support as unemotional

communication via digital mediums lost about 55% of non-verbal Communication (Caffrey, 2024). Leadership must look at different strategies to adapt to the abrupt change brought on by COVID-19 as face-to-face teams transitioned to virtual teams.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

COVID-19 has created a working world that has disrupted the ability of management to adeptly adjust to the severe changes in the workforce affecting the health of employees and the socio-economic climate (AlZaabi et al., 2021; Bartsch et al., 2020; Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Singh & Singh, 2020). Leadership was beside themselves as everyday working strategies pre-pandemic were different when managing relationships throughout the team development cycle once COVID-19 hit (Mitchell, 2023; Mofijur et al., 2021). Communication in the workplace pre-pandemic was also much different, where teams were primarily face-to-face and in-person (Grønning, 2021; Guptill et al., 2023; Martín-Raugh et al., 2023; Spence, 2020; Stocker et al., 2023). The leadership strategies used in face-to-face teams changed drastically from what was occurring in virtual teams (Gera et al., 2013; Gifford, 2022; Greimel et al., 2023; Karl et al., 2022). New leadership dilemmas emerged as work from home or remote working evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic to preserve the health and wellness of team members (Douglas et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2023; Hahang et al., 2022).

The shift pushed organizations into developing plans and encouraging organizational change to cope with the difficulties faced when working within the constraints of the WHO mandates (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021; Endrejat & Burnes, 2024). Leadership needed to develop approaches to encouraging their teams to adapt to

the situation created by COVID-19 in an unparalleled amount of time (Doblinger, 2022; Georganta et al., 2021). Nothing could have prepared leadership to have the ability to strategize for the impact that COVID-19 had on the world (Kniffin et al., 2021; Kukytė & Jasinskas, 2021). Limited research showed that there is still a gap in knowledge as leadership strategies needed to transition in an abrupt situation from face-to-face teams to virtual teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic are still necessary (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). This qualitative study allowed management to convey their experiences as the challenges of leading a team during the COVID-19 pandemic unraveled. The study included what managers perceived as strategies or best practices to enable them to succeed as leaders through the crisis.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore what leaders prepared for an organization to cope with situations like COVID-19 when abruptly moving employees from face-to-face to virtual environments (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). The single case study addressed the gap for this study and concurrently satisfied the purpose using a qualitative approach. The case study was used to provide data for leadership strategies that mid-to-senior level managers developed to cope with the abrupt changes from face-to-face teams to virtual teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). The plan was to examine an organization that experienced the phenomenon of COVID-19 repercussions on leadership during the pandemic. The next chapter will include the research discovered by describing the Research Design and Rationale, Role of the Researcher, Methodology, and Instruments of Trustworthiness that contributed to the study.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

As researchers develop their thoughts and search existing literature, they decide on the type of research design to use, depending on the problem's parameters, to determine which research design should be selected. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research methodologies will all generate different results depending on the research question (Agazu et al., 2022; Mello, 2022). After an extensive literature review on the phenomena, the research question posed for this study was as follows: What strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams? A

qualitative research design was used to answer the research question for this study. These methods utilize various empirical materials such as case studies, life experiences, and stories that show the routines and problems that individuals are struggling with in their lives (Taherdoost, 2022). The data exploration focused on the participants' in-depth meaning and motivations using qualitative research. Numbers cannot define lived experiences or emotions, so quantitative or partial mixed-method research designs would have been inefficient (Mello, 2022; Taherdoost, 2022). To explain the final decision on the selected research design, the following elaborates on the different types of qualitative research designs.

According to Agazu et al. (2022), a review of Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell's 2016 book, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* with a comparison to three other qualitative research texts explains in depth the six different types of qualitative research methods. These qualitative methodologies for performing research are the phenomenological method (deriving from phenomena), ethnographic model, grounded theory method, case study model, historical model, and narrative model (Agazu et al., 2022). Merriam and Tisdell explain that phenomenological research assumes that there is an essence(s) to shared experiences (Agazu et al., 2022). They explain ethnographic research as a factor that ties together all parts of the study with a focus on human society and culture. Grounded theory research occurs when a theory develops from the data that is gathered and is discovered from the data (Agazu et al., 2022). The historical model uses information that has already occurred to explain what is currently happening (Agazu et al., 2022). The narrative model takes place over time,

during which the observations and notes were taken on the stages of the data collected and pieces together a story (Agazu et al., 2022; Taherdoost, 2022). Lastly, the case study model aims to gain an in-depth exploration of people, processes, events, and programs while in the atmosphere or on-site, where insights were gained directly from firsthand conversations with the participants (Agazu et al., 2022; Taherdoost, 2022; Yin, 2018). A case study design was selected for this qualitative study, and the following section expands on the reasons for the choice.

Performing a case study, according to Yin (2018), means an empirical study or inquiry, including a detailed analysis of a situation within a group of people affected, will be made to gather information on the phenomenon at hand (Yin, 2018). Using a case study should reveal insights into the experiences the mid-to-senior level managers had with their team members when the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the global economy (Mello, 2022). Using other qualitative research methods may not allow for as detailed answers for the phenomena as there would be in the interviews found in the case study (Mello, 2022). The situation within the group of managers in an organization would allow for data to be collected alongside a detailed analysis of the COVID-19 situation within a group of people affected in one company (Yin, 2018).

### **Role of the Researcher**

For this qualitative single case study, my role was to be an objective observer for the data collection and final data analysis. I took on the role of the interviewer and observer for the data collection in the case study. The goal was to learn from the interactions and explanations from the interviews while realizing that the position of a

researcher was to be aware of the information gathered, to remain unbiased, and to encourage the participants to feel comfortable with their anonymity and confidentiality so they will be open and honest with their responses (Collins & Stockton, 2022). Informed consent forms were signed and dated before conversations with the participants. After recruitment, I was responsible for conducting and recording the interviews for the case study using an interview guide with pre-approved questions and professionally transcribing the information for analysis (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020).

Once the recruitment, interviews, and data collection stages were complete, the data were sent for coding to analyze and organize the results. Ensuring there are no ethical issues, one issue that could pose a conflict of interest is during the interview process. An ethical issue could arise as the study occurs in an organization where I worked directly. A caveat is that I had not worked with the organization for long and was not an active employee when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the mid-to-senior level leadership to change from face-to-face teams abruptly to virtual teams. I also did not work in the organization once the interview process began, which helped to remove the opportunity for bias. In this situation, the information gathered would be new and unknown to me.

Regarding questions answered by the participants with the intent to please, the assurance lies in the fact that the level of the interviewees were senior to me. The interviewee and the interviewer equally benefit from the interview process; there are no risks for either party participating in the study. Mid-to-senior level managers have more of an impact on the organization with their decision-making. The most important aspect



of this study is the eventual shift in how the mid-to-senior level managers were working with the transition from face-to-face to virtual environments. The interviewees' answers were anticipated to be truthful and unfiltered to gain helpful lived experiences of the pre-, during-, and post-COVID-19 pandemic in their organization for the research.

### **Methodology**

An integral part of the research was the selection of the methodology for gathering data. The following section includes the thought process regarding what was planned and how the research was executed. By organizing the research steps, the methodology can open the opportunity for other researchers to replicate the study and evaluate the reliability and validity of the data collected. Other researchers can apply this study's generalizations to ensure it is rigorously done and easily replicated.

This qualitative research used a single case study with interviews for the particular methodology to answer the research question and satisfy the gap. When using a case study approach, a contemporary case must be described or explored (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The specificity of this research was that case one is bound by time, between 2020 and the present time, and done within a single organization for a single case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The importance was in interpreting the data to be collected with an awareness of related contexts (Taherdoost, 2022). Case studies tend to be a non-invasive way to extract information from a group of people and allow for the exploration of the possibility of collecting data at one or more sites (Yin, 2018). A single case study was the best method to answer the research question because the responses relied on the lived experiences of the individuals within a single organization.

## **Participant Selection Logic**

When approaching the research topic with the organization participating in the single case study, conversations led toward needing a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach to collect acceptable participants (Yin, 2018). Non-probabilistic purposive sampling is non-probability sampling with a conscious decision as to what the sample needs to include and then chooses participants according to the parameters (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). For this study, the criterion for each participant was as follows: (a) they must have been a mid-to-senior level manager in an organization for two or more years before COVID-19, working primarily face-to-face; (b) they must have been working during the abrupt transition as a manager in 2020 when COVID-19 became relevant; and (c) they must currently be working at a mid-to-senior level post-COVID-19 and able to share their experiences. Race, gender, age, sexual identification, or disability had no role in participant selection as the intention is to perform a heterogeneity sampling.

A heterogeneous type of purposive sampling was used to ensure that the results represented the broadest views and opinions (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The aim was to ensure that the results were as rich as possible, to achieve multiple perspectives on the topic, and to record the experiences regardless of the proportional representation of the population (Younas et al., 2023). Mid-to-senior level managers were selected based on the criteria above. The interviewees were listed and approached for the study. Once the criterion was confirmed and participants were selected, there was an opportunity to interact with these mid-to-senior level managers via email, asking for their voluntary participation.

The organization selected for the qualitative single case study had over 2000 employees at its head office. Once enough mid-to-senior level managers as volunteer participants were selected, the case study interviews were performed until data saturation was reached. The target group was essential to the study as the mid-to-senior level managers had critical information on what was happening in the organization when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The managers explained the standard procedure before the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes that occurred immediately at the onset. They were attempting to improve the situation for all stakeholders in the organization.

Saturation of the data is when, through the interview process, some of the same themes start to repeat through the collection of the data. Data saturation occurs when new themes, ideas, opinions, or patterns stop occurring. As the interviews continued and patterns of the same information appeared, saturation occurred, and the interview part of the study was complete. (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Guest et al. (2020) found that most new information is found in the data within the first five to six interviews. After this, little new information appeared in the data as the sample size approached 20 interviews, satisfying the need to reach saturation within the dataset (Guest et al., 2020). Their test using four different datasets found that approximately 80% to 92% of all concepts identified occurred within the first ten interviews (Guest et al., 2020). Consequently, the number of interviews performed was 11 before data saturation occurred for this study.

### **Instrumentation**

Instrumentation in qualitative research refers to using validated tools to collect, measure, and analyze data related to the subject or phenomena (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Research instruments include tests, surveys, scales, questionnaires, or checklists (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). According to Ravitch and Carl (2019), this includes collecting and analyzing the data for strength and validity to get the best results, known as instrumentation in research. Delmont and Mason (1997) noted that qualitative research includes interpretive assumptions whereby the researcher has predispositions depending on the literature and experiences as a professional (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Interpretivism contends that humans, including the researcher and the participants, are, in fact, the instruments in the study (Delmont & Mason, 1997; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). For this research, as a qualitative tool, a qualitative interview protocol was used as the instrumentation, noting that I gathered the required data for analysis (Collins & Stockton, 2022; Wa-Mbaleka, 2020).

### ***Qualitative Interview Protocol***

The qualitative instrument utilized was a semistructured interview protocol. The interview protocol included open-ended questions as part of an interview process for mid-to-senior level managers working in a home renovation retail organization. The interview included ten open-ended questions to promote the opportunity for the interviewees to provide accurate lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in their position within their organization (Appendix B). The questions included in the interview directly related to the purpose of the study, asking specific questions about what happened to promote the ease of transition from abruptly moving from face-to-face teams to virtual teams for the health and safety of everyone in the organization. The data collected from these individuals represented the best data source, as the COVID-19 pandemic directly affected

their immediate working environment in a way not previously experienced. The expectation was that the answers collected provided information to sufficiently answer the research question posed: What strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams?

To ensure proper interview protocol was followed, an interview guide directed the process of collecting answers and observing the participants using open-ended semistructured questions before the data distribution (Appendix C). Each portion of the interview followed a sequence by the type of questions and the order in which the questions appeared, which promoted a conversation-type interaction (Collins & Stockton, 2022; Wa-Mbaleka, 2020). As the conversations ended, the data were audio recorded using the Zoom Application recording feature, and the instrumentation was an excellent way to collect, measure, and analyze the data from the willing participants. The interview process ended when data saturation occurred after 11 interviews, and the collected data could be used to outline the results. These results will be analyzed, discussed, and included in the study's conclusion.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The participants in this study were the target population of the purposive sampling consisting of mid-to-senior level managers working within a home renovation retail organization in Canada (Locke et al., 2022; Shava & Nkengbeza, 2019). These individuals worked in managerial positions pre-, during-, and post-COVID-19. Volunteers were willing to share their lived experiences of the abrupt transition from

face-to-face to virtual teams. The purposive sampling ensured that the individuals selected for the study would adequately provide information to satisfy the study's purpose and assist in answering the proposed research question (Locke et al., 2022; McGinley et al., 2021). The information gathered from these mid-to-senior level managers provided firsthand subjective perspectives on the issues and solutions that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic. The individuals were contacted via email within the organization with the assistance of a representative who used the criteria to recruit a satisfactory number of participants for the study (Bonisteel et al., 2021). All elements of the recruitment process were confidential. The recruitment email sent to these individuals included the purpose of the study, why their personal lived experiences would be beneficial to the study, any risks or benefits of the study for them, an informed consent procedure, and the anonymity and privacy of their responses shared during the interview process (Bonisteel et al., 2021).

The individuals selected needed to meet the criteria for the purposive sampling specified. The criteria include: (a) they must have been a mid-to-senior level manager in an organization for two or more years before COVID-19, working primarily face-to-face, (b) they must have been working during the abrupt transition as a manager in 2020 when COVID-19 became relevant, and (c) they must be working at a mid-to-senior level post-COVID-19 and able to share their experiences. The tenure in their position is vital for pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19, as the information compares the status quo before COVID-19 and what changed after COVID-19. As previously mentioned, the goal was to retrieve as much information from these individual experiences regardless of the

participant's race, gender, age, sexual identification, or disability to perform a heterogeneity sampling (Bonisteel et al., 2021). The interviews were completed as the data reached saturation, and the themes, categories, and codes became noticeably similar.

The qualitative interview protocol was the qualitative data collection instrument used in this study. The interview included ten open-ended questions for vetted mid-to-senior level managers who met the purposive sampling criteria for the data collection. After the recruitment process, each participant anonymously was able to review the information for the study and subsequently confirmed their participation with the informed consent form. The interviews took place over the video-conferencing application Zoom and were recorded with the camera disabled and name identification changed to numbers. The data were from the case study, and each of the 30-minute recorded Zoom interviews was performed with qualified participants. Then, the information was unanimously taken from the interview recordings and was professionally transcribed. The frequency of the interviews was one per participant, and as data saturation occurred after the 11<sup>th</sup> interview, the process was concluded (Guest et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Since a sufficient number of participants volunteered from the initial onset of the study, no follow-up procedures or second round of email invitations were required. The initial thought was that if there were not enough volunteers, there would need to be a second round of recruitment. If more participants were needed to reach saturation, an online survey of qualified participants within online forums would be an option. The initial social media forum to acquire participants would include LinkedIn, as the audience

readily shares professions and experiences. Since the organization in which the case study took place enlisted over 2000 employees, the initial attempt to recruit participants fulfilled the number of interviews needed to reach saturation. The secondary approaches were suggested for those interested in recreating the study and needing more options to procure participants.

Once the interview process with the participants was complete, immediate closure occurred at the end of the interview. The participants finalized their interview with five demographic questions with ranges for their responses, and they were thanked for their time (Appendix B). If a participant showed interest in knowing their interview results, they were offered to be shared at the end of the study. The final dissertation will be published in an open forum for participants. No major debriefing sessions or follow-up procedures were needed for the participants. Once the interview process was completed, the participant proceeded with their regular activities. The only stipulation was that the information shared with the interviewer was confidential and should not be discussed with any other interviewee who participated in the study.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

For this qualitative single case study, the interviews were dissected and analyzed to gain rich knowledge from the lived experiences of the participants (Locke et al., 2022). As is customary for qualitative data, the information stems from data primarily based on the person or group's ideas, opinions, thoughts, or feelings (McGinley et al., 2021). For this study, the plan was to analyze the interviews in a manner that is both scientific and sensitive to the information. With the voluntary participation of the eligible interviewees,



the information gathered was enlightening. To ensure the uncontaminated essence of the responses, the process for analyzing the participant interviews will be as follows.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis Plan***

The first step in creating an appropriate data analysis plan for this study was to conduct in-depth interviews to develop codes, categories, and themes. The information gathered was meant to answer the research question: What strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams? The responses from the interview process needed to be examined in detail to ensure that all aspects of the topic were satisfied. The connections were made once the responses were organized through an NVivo coding process, which could identify codes, categories, and themes.

As the qualitative interview process was completed and the responses to the ten open-ended conversational-type questions were collected, the transcribed recorded responses were analyzed. Examining the transcriptions meant the transcriptions were initially read to identify patterns within each transcription. Since the study used a case study format, the research design aimed to capture an emic perspective, otherwise known as reflecting the group's perspective; Nvivo coding followed for analysis. Nvivo coding was used to decipher the terminology or the language the participants used in their answers instead of deriving it from their interpretation (Locke et al., 2022). The results included the codes, categories, and emerging themes reflecting the interviewees' words, perspectives, and actions. Capturing the authentic lived experiences and meanings of the experiences and ideas that the participants shared increased the depth of understanding.

After examining the interview transcriptions using Nvivo coding, the initial codes emerged and were recorded as immediate responses to each question. The notes were compared to the results from all the interviews. The participants' spoken words were essential to capture the originality of the intentions and meanings through the eyes of the participants. The importance was to summarize the responses into phrases and then into single words from the participants as a first step commonly used in coding interviews (Locke et al., 2022). When defining a code in qualitative analysis, the codes are generally derived from the participant's responses and often can be one word, a short sentence, or a phrase (Saldaña, 2021). The code becomes the responses' essence-capturing, symbol, or suggestive attribute (Saldaña, 2021). The next step was to identify the most prominent themes from the categories stemming from the codes that will support answering the research question, otherwise known as axial coding (Locke et al., 2022). Lastly, any comparison to research results in codes will be cross-referenced with intercoder agreement checks to ensure consistency.

Manually coding the data has significant benefits in qualitative research. Coding provides structure and organization in the data, enabling a systemic way to analyze the responses and increasing the information's validity (Saldaña, 2021). The responses also accurately represent the participants' thoughts, ideas, and feelings. The participants communicate their true beliefs about the situation, preventing them from over-presenting a single opinion or group of people. Another benefit is decreasing potential biases since coding brings awareness to anything uncommon among the responses (Locke et al., 2022). The most important aspect of qualitative coding is that the process creates

transparency and enables other researchers to review the final analysis methodically and systematically (Saldaña, 2021).

When dealing with responses to the research question contrasting with the consensus, the information classifies as an outlier. Notes will be made on the opinions and thoughts of the outlier to capture all interesting information. Suppose the information is irrelevant to answering the research question. In that case, the outlier may be mentioned, but more emphasis is reflected on most of the consistent information in the participants' answers. Once the first coding cycle was completed through the data's dissection, the recorded results and conclusions were derived using video recordings, transcripts, and memos. The process of inductive thematic analysis was used to manually code and categorize the themes, which were coded in a way that related to the responses to the ten open-ended questions (Locke et al., 2022; Saldaña, 2021). The final goal was to answer the proposed research question and discuss what leadership strategies or best practices mid-to-senior level managers used or performed to successfully navigate the abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into a virtual team environment as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, the data's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are essential to be reassured for the study. A preemptive plan must be in place to avoid any issues with the trustworthiness of the data, which in turn can prevent unforeseeable problems of the subjective data (Kakar et al., 2023). Qualitative data found in the interpretive paradigm, including interviews, observations, and document analysis,

are the data-generating methods involved with human experiences (Shava & Nkengbeza, 2019). Multiple strategies were used in this qualitative study to accommodate the complexities of qualitative data research, ensuring an adequate amount of trustworthiness in the data. The following expands on the data's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and the strategies used to ensure trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

When speaking about the credibility of the data, how confident the qualitative researcher is in the truth of the research study's findings is imperative (Shava & Nkengbeza, 2019). Confirming the credibility of the data initially occurred through prolonged contact with the participants, as the interviews took approximately 30 minutes, allowing for the establishment of rapport alongside in-depth conversation. The conversations allowed for meaningful responses to be captured and triangulated. As mid-to-senior level managers participants completed the interviews, triangulation ensured that the research study's findings were credible even with only two interviews (Shava & Nkengbeza, 2019). Saturation was another critical credibility checkpoint, as the continuation of the case study's interview process reached a point of repetition in responses, and further interviews were unnecessary (Guest et al., 2020). A total of 11 interviews were completed before saturation was met. Lastly, meeting with the dissertation committee, as a peer debriefing strategy, would safeguard against any potential incorrect assumptions and biases in the interpretation of the data and to fill in any missing information in developing the thought process for the results.

**Transferability**

The transferability of the information in the data would be the most helpful in organizations plagued with the same affliction during COVID-19. The possibility of externally validating the data can demonstrate that the research study's findings apply to similar situations, populations, and phenomena (Younas et al., 2023). Transferability must include details of how the data is generalizable to show that the research study's findings can apply to other contexts, circumstances, and situations (Younas et al., 2023). The variation in the participant selection is part of the planned motive of the heterogeneous sampling to include managers from the mid-to-senior level within the selected organization without prejudice to their cultural background (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The intention was to narrow the variety of meanings and interpretations of the thick descriptions in the literature by comparing them to the responses from the interviews with the mid-to-senior level managers. The implication was that this process would make the information palatable for the reader to digest and use for their situations.

**Dependability**

Another quality indicator in the rigor of qualitative studies is the dependability of the research and data. Kakar et al. (2023) suggested that if one study's findings could use a similar population, context, circumstance, or situation, the findings are dependable (Kakar et al., 2023; Younas et al., 2023). Triangulation also ensures that dependability is recognized. Probing for a deeper meaning to support the social nature of qualitative research promotes the need for researchers to extract the meanings from the interactions with participants. Triangulation will connect the results or illuminate instances of

distinctions (Kakar et al., 2023). The goal was to ensure that other researchers could repeat the study and that the expectation was that the results would be consistent with what was discovered in this study (McGinley et al., 2021).

### **Confirmability**

To remain neutral when recording data, researchers must be privy to the level of confirmability. Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the degree of neutrality in the research study's findings (Kelly et al., 2021). Attention to potential bias or personal motivations is needed to find results and ensure that the results are based solely on the participants' responses (Kelly et al., 2021). To maintain confirmability, bracketing was used, which in qualitative research is the setting aside one's beliefs and a priori assumptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing preserved the raw data to avoid misrepresenting the participant's lived experience, meaning, or perception (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Reflexivity was applied to guarantee confirmability, which is described as self-reflection or developing a self-critical stance (Earnest, 2020). With these strategies, confirmability for this study could be maintained.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The intention for this study was to have the highest level of regard for human ethics. The Belmont Report directly responds to ethics found in qualitative research and promises to protect the participants with their principles. The three Belmont Report principles are the principles of respect, justice, and beneficence (Spellecy & Busse, 2021). The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study before any interaction with participants occurred to reach the principles of respect.

Actioning the IRB review was meant to protect both the person performing the research and the participants. The following speaks to the three Belmont Report principles and other ethical issues that may arise if this study were to be replicated.

### ***Respect for Persons***

The respect for persons principle directly refers to informed consent and autonomy (Pritchard, 2021). This principle was the first step in the research process when gathering contributors, as the individuals were approached with an informed consent form to participate in the research (Pritchard, 2021). The informed consent included any risks, benefits, procedures, and nature of the study. Once the consent was received, the participants were there solely through a voluntary agreement and could leave or forfeit the study at any time without implications. The ability for participants to have complete autonomy in their participation, including their consent, was imperative (Spellecy & Busse, 2021). Anonymity was sought by assigning numbers to mask the identity of the individuals and personal information to ensure the participants' privacy. All data were held in password-protected software/ hardware during the process, and physical data were only accessible to me as the researcher. Once the research is complete, all personal data will be destroyed after the 5-year mandated period to maintain the autonomy and privacy of the participants.

### ***Justice***

The justice principle refers to whether the social structure of research is satisfactory to protect the rights and interests of the participants volunteering for the study (Pritchard, 2021). The study's risks or benefits should be distributed equally among

the participants (White, 2020). As the selection of the participants should be equitable, any vulnerable persons were not in the target group (White, 2020). Human subjects in research must be protected as rules ensure that people can do so with respect for the sake of research. Thus, this research involving mid-to-senior level managers was approached so that the participants were fully informed of their rights and allowed the ability to deny participation at any point. Their responses used the same process, weighing their lived experiences and opinions equally and ensuring their privacy and anonymity regardless of any specific demographic that may differentiate them.

### ***Beneficence***

Beneficence addresses the role of risk-benefit criteria assessment, meaning that the promotion should focus on the benefits of the research for the participants, and the risks should be minimal (Pritchard, 2021). There were no immediate risks to the participants in this study, as interviews and studies were a part of the organizations' ability to assess their working processes. The study aligned with their ethical practices, and the benefit would only be for them to answer with their personal experiences to provide insight into how to improve the organization or any other similar business (Spellecy & Busse, 2021). There was no compensation for the participation of the volunteers, only the satisfaction of knowing that they will be contributing to a more significant cause for positive social change.

### **Summary**

This chapter included the plan for performing the proposed research through the Research Design and Rationale, Role of the Researcher, Methodology, and Instruments



of Trustworthiness. Reiterating, the purpose of this study would utilize the qualitative methodology; a single case study was used to explore what leaders prepared for an organization to cope with situations like COVID-19 when abruptly moving employees from face-to-face to virtual environments (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). The case study design specifically examined an organization that experienced the phenomenon of COVID-19 repercussions on leadership before, during, and after the pandemic. The secure explanation of the trustworthiness issues solved any issues with the data's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The ethical procedures adhering to the three Belmont Report principles of respect, justice, and beneficence were explicitly explained and outlined for the ethical involvement of participants (Spellecy & Busse, 2021).

Finally, with the approval of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), this study met the criteria for completion. The next chapter includes the information used to select participants to establish the research setting, including the demographics of the individuals used to collect the data and the data analysis. There will also be immediate evidence of the trustworthiness of the study, the results, and brief discussions. The hope was that the information captured from the case study could satisfy the purpose of the study and adequately answer the research question.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore what leaders prepared for an organization to cope with situations like COVID-19 when abruptly moving employees from face-to-face to virtual environments. The target audience was mid-to-senior level leaders within a home renovation retail organization that managed teams through the abrupt transition from in-person to virtual teams due to COVID-19. This research can close the knowledge gap in instilling strategies or best practices for managing teams to prepare leadership for a pandemic-like situation. The study can also provide suggestions that similar organizations can adopt to prepare for future crises. The following chapter contains a description of the research setting, the demographics of the participants interviewed, the data collection method, and the complete data analysis. Observations, peer debriefing, and reflexive notes were used to triangulate the interview data. To conclude the chapter, there is a deep thematic analysis of the results of the open-ended questions answered by the mid-to-senior level managers and a summative of the entire study.

The research question central to the study was as follows: What strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams? The interviews were conducted within the qualitative paradigm using the study question as a foundation for the open-ended questions. The search for strategies or best practices for leadership to manage teams during abrupt situations like COVID-19 was the basis of the study to help with major worldwide catastrophes in the future. The study participants provided

honest, information-rich, and passionate responses to the interview questions, and the data collection process was successful. The following depicts the data collection process, methods, results, and analysis.

### **Research Setting**

For this study, the semistructured interviews were conducted in a safe, convenient, and natural environment for the participants. The interviews were all completed using the Zoom conferencing application when the participant was comfortable conversing. The video camera was turned off, and all names of participants were changed to numbers to maintain confidentiality during the voice recording of the interview. I performed the interviews in a home office in the basement of a private home. The interview questions that were used can be found in Appendix B. The interview questions were all grounded based on the research topic, alongside the conceptual and theoretical foundations found throughout this study.

All interviews were completed on time with no interruptions. No external factors influenced the interviewees, neither with the individual nor within the organization. Nothing appeared to influence the participants during the interviews or affect the results of the data collected. Overall, the data collection in the setting provided was successful. The individual participants were pleased to be of service for the study.

### **Demographics**

To align with the needs of the study in the qualitative paradigm, non-probabilistic purposive sampling was used to select and interview 11 participants. To reiterate, purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling where there is a conscious

decision as to what the sample needs to include and then chooses participants according to the parameters (Mason, 2010; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The study included individuals who had significant experience working at a mid-to-senior level in a leadership role. The participants needed to meet the following criteria to be qualified participants: (a) they must have been a mid-to-senior level manager in an organization for two or more years before COVID-19, working primarily face-to-face; (b) they must have been working during the abrupt transition as a manager in 2020 when COVID-19 became relevant; and (c) they must be working at a mid-to-senior level post-COVID-19 and able to share their experiences.

The most important aspect of the criteria was the tenure of each participant. The timing was vital for working experience pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19, as the information compares the status quo from before COVID-19 and what changed after COVID-19. As previously mentioned in the procedures for recruitment, participation, and collection section, the goal was to retrieve as much information from the experiences of the interviewees, regardless of the participant's race, gender, age, sexual identification, or disability, to execute a heterogeneity sampling (Bonisteel et al., 2021). The study focused on these individuals' lived experiences as they were directly affected by the changes occurring in their organization. Since the study was a single case study, the participants were limited to one participating organization. The home renovation retail organization housed enough individuals for a high yield of quality responses from the participants.

Participants with less than the required tenure were excluded from the study to maintain the highest standard for experience reflection before and after the COVID-19

pandemic. The first-hand experiences were meant to capture authentic and sincere responses from the population, and with the responses received, this goal was achieved. Once sufficient individuals were reached for the study, consent was obtained, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym from P01 to P11. Table 1 gives the participants' demographics and characteristics, noting that pseudonyms were provided to keep participants' identities anonymous for confidentiality. Lastly, in line with the Walden University IRB, there were no vulnerable participants, and they were cleared as an ethical group of participants for the study.

**Table 1**

*Demographics and Characteristics of Participants*

Participants	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Marital Status	Job Level
P01	Male	45+	Caucasian	University Degree	Married	C-Level
P02	Male	45+	Caucasian	University Degree	Married	Senior Manager
P03	Male	45+	Caucasian	College Diploma	Married	Manager
P04	Female	45+	Caucasian	College Diploma	Married	Manager
P05	Male	45+	Caucasian	University Degree	Married	Manager
P06	Female	45+	Caucasian	University Degree	Not Married	Director
P07	Female	45+	Caucasian	College Diploma	Married	Director
P08	Female	45+	Caucasian	University Degree	Married	Manager
P09	Male	45+	Caucasian	University Degree	Engaged	Manager
P10	Female	45+	Caucasian	Master's Degree	Married	Director
P11	Female	30-45	Caucasian	University Degree	Not Married	Director

## Data Collection

The initial step in the process of data collection was to ensure that the plan for the study was ethical. Once the approval from the Walden University IRB was received (#05-14-24-1011446), the data collection commenced. In this study, the qualitative case study's data collection methodology included semistructured interviews. For the case study, a specific home renovation retail organization was approached as the participating organization. The partner organization agreement was first signed before any communication with any of the participants to solidify the confidentiality and anonymity of the individuals who wished to volunteer.

Alongside the partner organization representative, I was able to provide the requirements for the participants and use a list of individuals who met the criteria. Purposive sampling was used to collect 15 individuals who met the inclusion criteria. Each of these individuals was sent an email describing the details of the study found in Appendix A. The email also had contact information if individuals needed more details from me on what the study entailed. Out of 15 people who were sent the invitation over two weeks, 11 individuals consented to be interviewed.

Times and dates were agreed upon with the potential participants through email to confirm opportunities for both parties to meet. The solicited participants started to respond on the first day of the study acquisition email, with three initial responses from volunteers. The last participant responded three weeks after the initial email was sent and was the 15<sup>th</sup> volunteer to respond. The participants were asked to offer three different time slots in their schedules that they could attend, and once confirmed, they were sent an

email with the information for the Zoom conference meeting. The participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and were given adequate time to ask questions before they consented to participate.

The participants were made aware that the interview would be voice-recorded with cameras disabled and that their personal information would be kept confidential. The interviews were meant to be anonymous, and the participants were all given a number identification to replace their actual names. Before any interviews were recorded, the participants were asked in real time if they would consent to their voices being recorded and the information from the interview being allowed to be used for the study. All ethical procedures were followed per the direction of Walden University's IRB, and the participants were ensured they understood their rights and responsibilities. The participants also knew they could end the interview at any point or skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

The individuals who consented to the interviews participated in the data collection using the Zoom conferencing application. The interviews were estimated to be about 30 minutes long, with some lasting up to 45 minutes. The interviews were all voice recorded, the video disabled, and the individual's name was requested to be changed to their numeric pseudonym to maintain anonymity. The pseudonyms assigned were P01 to P11 to account for the individuals who participated in the data collection. Conversations were relaxed, and participants were allowed to express their feelings and describe their experiences as answers to the open-ended questions found in Appendix B. These semistructured questions allowed for the qualitative data collection to occur over two

weeks, with the first interview starting on June 14, 2024, and the last interview taking place on June 28, 2024. To ensure the information received from the participants was accurate, recapping the information or repeating the answers to the participants to confirm correctness was performed.

The Zoom video conferencing application was an appropriate method to collect data for this study as it allowed immediate video and audio recording. The audio recordings were then transcribed using Otter.ai, which allowed for a closer examination of the responses from the participants. The interview information was saved on a password-protected personal computer and external hard drive. The data collected from this study will be saved for 5 years before being destroyed to follow guidelines set out by Walden University's IRB. During the interviews, I took notes and recorded reflexive observations to decipher interpretations from the interviews.

Each interview started with a short introduction about me and then a request for consent to perform the interview, as well as a review of any risks associated with their participation. All of the interviewees agreed to be interviewed and recorded for the educational purposes of this study. Once introductions were complete, an easy rapport was built so the participant could share their lived experiences with honest and open responses. The participants shared their stories and offered a generous amount of quality information. Reiterating again, all the interviews were audio recorded and immediately transcribed for further dissection.

In terms of data saturation, no new codes were discovered after eight interviews, which indicated that data saturation had occurred. Data saturation is claimed to ensue



when new themes, ideas, opinions, or patterns stop appearing. As the eighth interview was completed, a note was made to indicate that many of the already identified codes were starting to repeat throughout the interviews. As the interviews continued and patterns of the same information appeared, saturation occurred, and the interview portion of the study was complete (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I continued to complete the remaining three interviews as they were previously booked with the participants and to hopefully reinforce that sufficient data saturation was reached. When no new codes were found in the data at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> interview, the confirmation for data saturation was apparent.

The last step in the interview process was to ensure member-checking of the recorded and transcribed interviews. Once the software Otter.ai produced the interview transcriptions, I reviewed the data to ensure the audio recordings were correctly transcribed. The data were separated into interviewer and participant, using their pseudonyms, and were updated with any changes needed to clarify the information. The participants were then individually emailed with the transcriptions from their interviews. They were offered the option to review and provide approval, feedback, changes, or omissions in the final version within a specified timeline. The responses from the participants who wanted changes or fixes were then applied to the transcriptions and once the timeline had been reached, they were notified that data analysis would begin. The data were then moved into the data analysis stage where the information from the interviews would be used to answer the research question central to this study.

A simple tactic used to help eliminate biases and record reflections was for a reflexive journal to be used. During and after each interview, notes were taken of the participant's mood, emotions, self-awareness, personality, and leadership style. The most obvious trait that was recorded was the passion that some of these leaders had for their organization and their coworkers and teams. Their reflections and experiences created a precise understanding of the strategies that leadership had to apply as COVID-19 upended businesses on a global scale. In the face of crisis, the information provided by these individuals will guide any leader who faces similar crisis management.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research is the sorting and understanding linguistic data materials to decipher implicit and explicit dimensions to make sense of the information and what it represents, either in a subjective manner or to find social meanings (Mezmir, 2020). In this section, the primary data to be analyzed is the transcriptions from 11 interviews performed over the Zoom conferencing software application with mid-to-senior level managers. The purpose of the analysis is to find meanings through the recorded responses from the participants. The goal is to form themes, relationships, patterns, or assumptions of the participants' interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation (Saldaña, 2021). The following data analysis was conducted according to the five phases of analysis by Yin (2018): assemble, collect, interpret, disassemble, and conclude.

## **Transcriptions and Coding**

The first step in the data analysis process was to take the raw data as digital recordings from the interviews and have them transcribed. The recordings were transcribed using the software Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence software capable of listening to and organizing linguistic information into transcriptions. The transcriptions still needed to be edited for accuracy as the software could not indicate language inflections nor accurate breaks in the content when different individuals were speaking. Once this was complete, the participants were emailed their transcriptions and were asked to review the information for member-checking purposes. Any required changes were made, and the transcriptions were uploaded into Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS).

In this process, NVivo was the QDAS software used to organize the data for coding and analysis. The software made the information accessible to navigate, display, and compare the different transcriptions. Each transcription was named with the participant's pseudonym and uploaded into NVivo. To code the individual interviews, the transcription would be viewed in the display window, the information was highlighted when a topic could be formed into a code, and the code was created and attached to the highlighted portion. The first cycle of the process included bottom-up coding, which continued throughout the entire transcription. The key points were highlighted to indicate an important topic, and codes were derived through the in-vivo coding process. A total of 32 unique codes were identified in the 11 transcriptions (see Appendix D).

These codes were then exported from NVivo into a Microsoft Excel file and imported into a Microsoft Word file, where they were organized into clusters. The clusters were then analyzed for similarities and then reorganized to ensure the similarities within the clusters. A second coding cycle occurred using the top-down coding review process, where the codes were reviewed according to the themes found in the literature review. The coding process was much faster in the second cycle as the literature review themes covered broader topics. Once again, the file was exported, and the codes were compared to the first cycle to find similarities or discrepancies. The codes were created not only to label highlighted topics within the transcriptions but also to link the data to ideas so that the patterns in the data can be grouped into more significant categories for finding richer meanings and, ultimately, themes for the phenomenon (Mezmir, 2020; Saldaña, 2021).

Saldaña (2021) states that coding does not constitute the totality of the data analysis but sorts the information so that any underlying information can be discovered. Coding is an interpretive and iterative process, which is subjective, meaning different researchers can assign different codes to the same material depending on how individuals may interpret the information differently (Saldaña, 2021). For this study, transcriptions were edited for clarity, member-checking for accuracy, reading and re-reading the transcribed text for familiarization with the content, compared reflexive notes to the transcriptions, and, through an iterative process, slowly developed categories and themes in the data. The responses to the semistructured questions in the interview transcriptions were considered the raw data that needed to be organized. Familiarizing themselves with

the data through repeated listening of the audio and reading of the transcriptions, the data's highlighting revealed the responses' main ideas and meanings and began to formalize.

Since Otter.ai was used to transcribe the data, the process previously mentioned to update and check the transcriptions for accuracy was completed over two weeks. The 11 participants were forthcoming and cooperative during the interview process and provided insights that would not have been captured without their experiences. The main research question was the foundation for the study, and the framework mentioned in the conceptual framework portion of this paper outlined the requirements for the responses from the individuals. When using thematic data analysis, the procedure for deriving codes to create themes led to a need for inductive and deductive analysis, with the data being the information that the results were grounded (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The purpose is for surface-level and obvious codes, sometimes called semantic, and underlying or implicit codes, otherwise known as latent, to be brought to the forefront for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

To deep dive into the data content and develop codes, categories, and themes, the qualitative data analysis process was started by using inductive thematic coding. Inductive thematic coding is an approach to systematically analyzing qualitative raw data but flexibly (Braun & Clarke, 2024). With this type of inductive coding approach, I could identify, analyze, and report any patterns in the data, potentially leading to creating categories with the best result being themes. The themes derived would be the vital text found in the data. Inductive coding also allows for the codes to be derived explicitly from

the data and prevents any prior assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Lastly, a significant amount of time was spent in the reiterative process before reoccurring phrases were seen in the data using inductive coding. Table 2 gives examples of the top recurring codes, categories, and themes found in the raw data, followed by the main categories discovered.

**Table 2**

*Examples of Top Recurring Codes, Categories, and Themes*

No.	Code	Category	Theme
1	Supporting Employees Physical and Mental Health	Professional Relationship Management	Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace
2	Connecting with Employees	Professional Relationship Management	Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace
3	Trust and Team Culture	Emotional Responses for Teams and Leadership	Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace
4	Challenges in New Environment	Managing Challenging Change	Mitigating Extraordinary Crisis and Change
5	Continuing Business as Usual (BAU)	Managing Challenging Change	Swiftly Pivoting to Providing Structure for Business
6	Strategies or Procedures in New Environment	Managing Challenging Change	Swiftly Pivoting to Providing Structure for Business
7	In-Office Working	Working Location	Adapting to the Unconventional Workplace Environment
8	Remote Working	Working Location	Adapting to the Unconventional Workplace Environment

### **Professional Relationship Management**

The participants spoke about their organization and teams during COVID-19 in the interviews. They spoke about the impact of the pandemic globally and how it directly affected the people within the organization. Different participants chimed in, saying that physical health was initially one of the biggest worries with WHO restrictions falling into

place. Furthermore, once the pandemic set in, the worry about mental health became another fundamental issue. Learning to connect with people through new formats to ensure physical and mental stability became a priority. Participant 01 explicitly stated that they knew that their leaders were connecting more frequently with their teams to support the idea that connectivity would be the foundation of the path for communication in the abrupt situation of COVID-19.

The participants believed that this was a time when the organization needed to make quick adjustments to the status quo for the business and learn to pivot to be successful. The leaders knew that supporting the people became the number one priority because, as stated by Participant 03, our group put the people first, which I think was necessary. The pandemic forced leadership to keep in touch, which was central to finishing the work. The problem with the rapid change was that many challenges arose with technological infrastructure, software, communication expectations, standards, strategies, and controlling what could be controlled. The shift encouraged new ideas but also changed how businesses would continue as usual in the future. In-person working still existed, but the new hybrid versions of the workplace were here to stay.

### **Emotional Responses for Teams and Leadership**

Another essential topic that became apparent through the discussions with the participants was their emotional responses toward their teams. According to P09, trust is a critical ingredient for a successful team. Building trust within a team became challenging due to COVID-19 and needing to move to remote teams. Supported by P03 and P07, the fact that in virtual environments, difficulties arose when building a trusting,

collaborative team when you have only met them once, but the shared experience, whether good or bad, created the culture, no matter what that was. P05 mentioned that the experience was not an easy one in terms of managing through the uncertainty but that we got through this, that we stayed together as a team unified, we did not fragment, we knuckled down, and we said, you know, we got to get this done.

### **Managing Challenging Change**

Challenges in the new environment, continuing business as usual, and strategies or procedures in the new environment. There was mention of the difficulties of hiring and the struggle to manage the challenging change as a consensus among the participants. P01 stated that we were hiring rapidly to support our volume and strategic changes; even our whole new hire process has changed several times. Without the proper strategies in place, there were no parameters to hold the interviewer accountable for meeting the required standards for hiring and onboarding. P02 and P03 understood the value of the ability to change respectfully, stating that if you embrace that change, it will work well; if you resist it, it will be more frustrating since it was a very abrupt change. The ability to manage change in the abrupt situation was apparent, and the participants were vocal about the need to mitigate the change.

### **Working Location**

The location of where employees were working and the time of transition were also other topics that participants spoke about. There is a comparison between what they knew as in-office work environments and the new situation with online or virtual environments. P03 was convinced that the crisis changed their working environments.



They stated that one crucial difference in team communication occurred when collocated versus virtual. Whereas pre-COVID, I could walk over to our office and close the door, and we could meet in person, but most of them were essentially 100% remote for four years. P05 expressed explicitly that the change in the teams meant essential aspects of communication were eliminated, stating that it was hard because generally, if you are having a one-on-one meeting with somebody who is face-to-face, you can read body language and pick up on things that indicate they are uncomfortable.

### **Positive Social Change**

Throughout this study, the participants were able to communicate that they felt they contributed to positive social change. Some insisted on their attempts to ensure their teams were taken care of, and setting the example of being the ideal leader was an indication of maintaining positivity given the situation. Others mentioned maintaining their professionalism, providing consistent communication for their partners, and mentorship for their team members, including team training and check-ins for mental health and wellbeing, alongside managing their workload amidst the organization's goals, also contributed to positive social change. Overall, the participants also felt that participating in this study would ultimately provide future leaders with the basics of leading through unprecedented times of crisis.

### **Discrepant Cases**

There were two discrepant cases in the results of all the codes and categories that appeared. The outlying responses found were inconsistent and only resulted in minimal occurrences, less than ten throughout all 11 interviews. The mention of the discrepant

cases is to ensure that all information is considered when reviewing the results. The mention of the discrepant cases is meant to show the importance of the evaluated information and the effect the outliers may have on the study. As a result, there was no need to code or include them further in the study.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

As stated initially, due to the nature of the research, for qualitative research to be trustworthy, the data's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are essential for the study. Initially, the preemptive plan was to avoid issues with the trustworthiness of the data and prevent unforeseeable problems with the subjective data (Kakar et al., 2023). The evaluation of the rich data derived from the study to build theory is part of the qualitative inquiry and thus needs to be translated. To capture the essence of the data, I must provide plausible insights by deepening the understanding of the phenomena through the lens of my own interpretations (Shufutinsky, 2020). The importance of using tools and instruments to foster the amount of rigor and transparency around the research data improves the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Shufutinsky, 2020). The following explains the different tools and instruments used to accomplish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

In this study, to maintain credibility in the data, my responsibility was to ensure the truthfulness of the research data (Shava & Nkengbeza, 2019). According to Shava and Nkengbeza (2019), ensuring trustworthiness in the research credibility is used to express confidence in the data research and the truth in the results. The purposive

sampling ensured that the participants met the study's criteria, which helped strengthen its credibility. All participants agreed on a time to be interviewed, and all 11 interviews were performed virtually over two weeks. I was able to establish credibility through prolonged contact with the participants.

The prolonged contact with the participants occurred during the in-depth conversational interviews that took approximately 30 to 45 minutes, through communicative emails establishing rapport and integrity, and with multiple member-checking touchpoints throughout the process. Full disclosure communication was maintained with the mid-to-senior level managers, keeping honesty and transparency as priorities through the data collection process. To establish ongoing credibility in the data, triangulation was performed using the data collected from the interviews and reflective note-taking. As mentioned above, the interviews were transcribed, and the participants reviewed the transcripts through member-checking. Committee members also thoroughly examined the data results for a critical review to show that the study was credible.

### **Transferability**

For the transferability of the information in the data, the findings need to show that the results can be applied in other contexts, not only in the current study. The responses from the participants directly affected by COVID-19 in their organization were sought out for this study. To externally validate the data, the known study's findings can be applied to other managers or leaders in organizations with similar situations, populations, and phenomena since the global industry was affected by COVID-19 (Younas et al., 2023). Therefore, the research study's findings are transferable as the data

can be applied to other contexts, circumstances, and situations (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

The thought is that since there is knowledge of many similar home renovation retail organizations that needed to change their strategies or processes because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the information can be used in other contexts or situations (Younas et al., 2023).

The information from the participants during collection, data analysis, and the results were documented and explained to portray the experiences and ideas of the participants. I used their interpretations of the thick descriptions found in the literature and compared them to the responses from the participants. While this unveiled many participant similarities, there is still a need for circumvention of the data and interpretation of the results. The circumvention was done so the layman could understand the opportunity for positive social change. With enough details of the phenomenon found in the study that correlate to situations among different organizations, there is enough truthfulness found in the study to ensure transferability.

### **Dependability**

In the initial introduction, dependability was another critical aspect of qualitative studies. Dependability brings together the reliability and credibility of the findings in a study (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). According to Lemon and Hayes (2020), for data to be dependable in data collection, the information will be distinguished in their context with time and place, and consistent explanations will be throughout the results. Triangulation was used to ensure that dependability is achieved for this study. Triangulation is a qualitative research strategy to test the validity of the data where multiple sources are

combined and unified to synthesize defining phenomena (Kakar et al., 2023; Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Using member-checking, peer reviewing, and reflexive notes assisted with triangulation. The connections and meanings extracted from the collected data support the idea that other researchers would have the ability to recreate the study with consistent expectations and results, as found within the original study done here (McGinley et al., 2021). The end goal was to ensure that the study would be stable regardless of how many times the study would be replicated, and then the data would be confirmed to be dependable.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the last evidence of trustworthiness that needs to be addressed in a study. Remaining neutral was a vital indicator of this study's confirmability level. Defined as referring to the degree of neutrality in the research study's findings, confirmability is an essential aspect of trustworthiness (Kelly et al., 2021). In this study, any feelings, biases, or personal motivations were recorded while conducting the research, paying attention to ensuring the participants were the source of pure information. Bracketing was used to maintain confirmability, which in qualitative research is the compartmentalization of personal beliefs and a priori assumptions (Ahmed, 2024).

This study achieved the highest level of confirmability through peer debriefing, member-checking, and reflexive journaling. Speaking with others through peer debriefing and member-checking were excellent external checks for the content. For extra reassurance that the research involved confirmability, reflexivity was applied. The self-

reflection process allowed me to develop a self-critical stance, removing any implications for imposing biases onto the data collected (Earnest, 2020). Validation of the strategies mentioned here ensured that confirmability for this study was maintained.

### **Study Results**

The following section includes the information found in the study results and is organized using the themes that occurred throughout the data. The responses from the participants illuminated consistent themes that provided direct answers to the research question in this study. The data were directly gathered from the 11 participants using the ten semistructured interview questions for this qualitative single case study found in Appendix B. The information gathered from the interviews directed the development of the codes, categories, and, ultimately, the themes that have become the basis of this study. Attention to the meanings and feelings behind the expressions of the participants was recorded to help develop a lived-experience view of the themes.

The development of the themes was derived from the more profound feelings expressed and the pure feedback from the mid-to-senior level leadership on how COVID-19 explicitly affected the organization where the single case study occurred. The data analysis produced four significant themes with subsequent sub-themes that would assist in answering the research question. The gap between where strategies and leadership change might have occurred in organizations to manage COVID-19 challenges was addressed. The central research question that the study focused on was: What strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams? Using the

research question as the guide, themes in the data collection were unveiled by using codes to categorize them into themes.

In the results of this qualitative single case study, leaders shared what they did within a single organization to cope with COVID-19 when abruptly moving employees from face-to-face to virtual environments. Therefore, the research question was aimed to help fill the gap in the literature and assist in discovering the strategies or processes that were put in place to adapt to the new situation with COVID-19. The codes, categories, and themes found in Append D will be expanded here in the results section with the supporting information found directly in the participants' organized from most to least relevant. References to specific participants will come in the form of their pseudonyms: P01, P02, P03, P04, P05, P06, P07, P08, P09, P10, and P11. The four themes were as follows: bringing humanity back into the workplace, mitigating extraordinary crisis and change, swiftly pivoting to providing structure to business, and adapting to the unconventional workplace environment.

### **Theme 1: Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace**

When imagining the workplace, many people consider the place as a business that should be run like a tight ship. Rules, regulations, goals, and processes top the list of what should be included in a business setting. Over the years, many organizations have realized that there needs to be more to the organizational culture than clock in, do work, and clock out. What leadership could never have anticipated was the shift that occurred when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Organizations need to take care of their people for

their businesses to run correctly, and thus prioritize bringing humanity back into the workplace.

### ***Professional Relationship Management***

In general, during COVID-19, relationships, regardless of the situation, became hard to manage with the WHO restrictions that were put in place. Isolation, social distancing, and working from home created obstacles never before faced by present-day leaders. An even greater pressure was put on managers attempting to manage professional relationships in the new virtual world. Some challenges that came into play were supporting employees' physical and mental health, connecting with employees, and dealing with ethical issues and COVID-19. The following expands the conversation on these topics.

### ***Supporting Employees' Physical and Mental Health***

Moving abruptly from in-person teams to virtual teams greatly impacted employees' physical and mental health. COVID-19 forced organizations to close their face-to-face operations and required employees to work from home virtually. Initially, with the participants interviewed, the thought was that the changes from leaving the physical office would only be for a short time, but the misconception undoubtedly changed. With the realization of the reality of the situation, participants, alongside their team members, began to feel the strain on their mental health. Mental health was brought to the forefront after the abrupt transition to virtual teams with the continued effect that COVID-19 had on people.



The immediate support for employees was for physical health protection. The changes came with leadership following WHO restrictions; as P01 and P03 mentioned, the first step that the organization took was to transition as many employees as possible out of the office and set them up at home. According to P08, the transition occurred not only in the head office but also in-store, which meant the organization was trying to get information about the closures of the retail stores to all extensions of the organization. There was the caveat that some teams were already set up to work from home, so the transition was less complicated for those teams than other teams in different departments, according to P09. Other teams still had to navigate in-person work as some physical jobs, for example, in the warehouse, could not be done from home.

There was an immediate need to restructure protocols so in-person employees would not cross paths, and according to P09, the organization had to change policies and practices to handle the situation from a health and safety perspective. P07 reflected that it was a sensitive transition, as some employees were sent home immediately, some teams became hybrid, and others stayed in office for the entire pandemic. As mentioned by P11, the organization as a whole did a really good job prioritizing the health and safety of the employees. The transition was unpredictable, and P07 states that the discomfort and fear of the unknown were complicated because the situation was not normal for many people. Awareness of the feelings of others has started to bring forth a specific quality that should also be mentioned. Emotional intelligence is a vital characteristic of a leader that must be honed to recognize their employees' mental health shift.

Mental health wellness became more prominent after the transition as the COVID-19 pandemic started to span over more than one year. The world had, at that point, become an unpredictable place, and at that time, work became a big anchor for a lot of people, according to P06. Another participant, P11, stated that they had an extrovert on their team, and they required a lot of interaction. The leader then accommodated the person so they could come to the office on a minimal basis just so that she could get the interpersonal interactions needed. Isolation was a problem for many single or alone in a household.

The particular extrovert mentioned struggled with mental health distress from working remotely and being isolated, according to P11. The opposite was also true as introverted people can find it hard to ask for help and accept help P11. The help being referred to is mental health help, something that was not as apparent in organizations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. P07 said that humanizing the experience and sharing those really difficult moments when you would say, “Oh my God, do you remember the time we had to do this?” made the experiences employees were going through more relatable. P07 stated that whether you are married or single, with kids or without kids, have elderly family members, or any variation of home life, all situations are unique. Empathy was a prominent characteristic that leadership needed to possess to help employees find balance. As summed up by P09, no matter where the employees were, whether technical, personal, or professional challenges, they could raise those, and they would take those particular challenges and speak with their direct leader to find solutions

to the problems if required. The strategies listed above assisted leadership in supporting their employees by prioritizing their physical and mental health throughout the pandemic.

### *Connecting with Employees*

Considering connecting with employees, leadership typically could achieve considerable connectivity with in-person teams, and even then, there was always some level of miscommunication. Many participants in this study mentioned connecting with their employees on a personal level as a major hurdle and setback as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. The thought was that communication and connectivity were a hand-in-hand situation. Unfortunately, with the COVID-19 pandemic as an ongoing crisis, in some instances, leadership was faced with building relationships with individuals they did not see on a regular cadence or at all, which created problematic issues becoming emotionally connected to employees.

Communication is one of an organization's most significant assets, and in-person communication has elements of body language that can be lost over virtual mediums. Before COVID-19, multiple participants commented on the differences between in-person and online personal connections. In-person interactions, according to P01, P04, P06, P07, P08, and P10, leadership valued and appreciated the connectivity of seeing people in the hallway and holding doors and saying hello. These were expressed as essential and valuable instances of spontaneous interaction that would take place in the office, according to P07. There was a consensus that leadership needed to maintain that human connection for everyone, not only employees.

To solve the problem of lack of personal connectivity between leadership and employees, some managers insisted on certain strategies to help mitigate the difference in communication. Recreating the in-person development of relationships similar to being on the premises, where individuals would see each other all the time to make personal connections, P01 states that quite a variety of leaders consistently made an effort to try to have those connections and check in on teams. P02 suggested that they start all team meetings with trivia to get people talking within the first two minutes, encouraging them to speak throughout meetings and be engaged. Individuals would also be asked questions to each one of the team players by the end of the video calls to ensure that nothing had been missed that needed to be shared. P03 and P04 illuminated that sharing and transparency were also a priority; regardless of the medium, leaders could set the stage for employees to have a nurturing experience.

To support this, many leaders on different teams worked with team members to build a regular cadence for personal connectivity, for example, sharing pet photos or at-home working space, according to P06. Leadership constantly raised questions about whether employees were engaged in the conversation, if they were aligned with what you were speaking about, or if they were uninterested, according to P07. Using video chat was something that many people, leaders and employees alike, needed to familiarize themselves with using. While it was initially awkward to stare at yourself, having videos on helped enhance the connectivity because you garnered some facial expressions and body language from the employees. The sentiments were not always the same among different teams. P08 worked with their team to put together rules of engagement for there

to be connectivity, for example, saying hello at the start of the day, saying goodbye at the end of the day, updating statuses for out-of-office alerts, and other daily ins and outs as if you were in-person. The structure created regular communication and regular meetings, setting a rhythm for communication and maintaining the discipline for connectivity to occur, stated P09. P10 said that camaraderie was important for the collegiality of the team, and P11 agreed, stating that the approach kept communication lines open and harbors collaboration.

### ***Ethical Issues and COVID-19***

The issue around ethics became apparent with the transitions caused by COVID-19 when teams moved into virtual teams. A handful of participants agreed there were issues with certain work ethics and expectations between employees and leadership. For the company's sake and to help carry the extra work created by COVID-19, some individuals were giving more of themselves than they were receiving in compensation. The expectations seemed to roll out faster than the work could be assigned and the extra work needed to be done. The issue became apparent to the participants as time went on in the pandemic.

There was some truth, according to P03, that being overworked became an issue as you found stability in work; it was constant and stable. Very quickly, you could easily create the expectation that you would be working 12-14 hours a day. In truth, there was pressure to complete work, and the expectations did cross certain boundaries, stated P06. They state that at the beginning of COVID-19, there were some extended hours, well into the evening and even on weekends. There was a sense of urgency in specific departments

because communication was required to go out, which made senior leadership feel very demanding. Both P03 and P06 mentioned that crossing ethical boundaries were being challenged, and the expectations bordered on taking advantage of people. There was the expectation that you would be accessible and that people would be able to reach out to you at any time.

One of the most significant responses to this discrepant case response was that P06 expanded on the ethical issue, stating that they felt that, at one point, the organization had the right to every moment of their time if they needed it. Recognizing that not all organizations were able to cope with change in the same way, the reality was that leadership felt that employees were expected to answer if there were calls at 10 pm that the employees were available. There was a general consensus that there was some tiptoeing around ethical expectations for availability for employees, increasing as the responsibilities increased. When speaking on the topic with others, responses were vaguely similar to those of other participants. No solution for the ethical issue with the requirements for employees outside of their job descriptions came to the forefront as a strategy or improved process.

### ***Leadership Perceptions of COVID-19***

As leadership learned the nuances of working in a virtual environment, there were certain elements that stood out. Individuals were forced to reflect on their leadership styles, working through what they saw as unprecedented times. Learning to lead during COVID-19 proved to be a challenge for many. Managers, in fact, were now the trailblazers in the areas of leading their teams through a crisis like the COVID-19

pandemic. The subsequent paragraphs expand on the leadership styles that were discussed, the perceptions of how COVID-19 was handled by the organization, and the influence of the leader's personal values or opinions.

### ***Leadership Styles***

Managers all have specific leadership styles that they apply to lead their teams and direct reports. There are six common leadership styles, Transformational Leadership, Delegative Leadership, Authoritative Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Participative Leadership, and Servant Leadership (Bartsch et al., 2020). In situations like COVID-19, leadership matters in crisis-induced digital transformation, according to Bartsch *et al.* (2020). The lack of stability and increase of change encouraged change in the physical environment and how individuals interacted. With teams moving virtual, many participants spoke out about how their leadership styles shifted during COVID-19.

When working face-to-face, traditional interactions and managerial skills were used prior to COVID-19. P02, P06, and P09 specifically called out Servant Leadership to define the best leadership style in the new virtual team environment. Servant Leadership is a style of leadership where the leader takes the needs of the employee and puts them first (Bartsch et al., 2020). For some leaders like P02, P06, and P09 Servant Leadership was readily recognizable and stated in their responses as the leadership style they used during the pandemic. The thought was that during COVID-19, there was the opportunity to keep in touch with employees on a more personal and empathetic level, according to P09. Transparency in communication and putting employees' feelings and needs first was a trait that P06 mentioned in their response. P02 stated that they started to plan in-person

meals after hours to check in and see how team individuals were doing. The act was a good way to boost the morale of the team and to help them stay connected.

Others, like P01, P04, P03, P05, P07, P08, P10, and P11, described elements of Servant Leadership that they used to manage their teams. P03 stated that they needed to know their team members were OK, and that was the biggest thing, putting the business needs on hold to support the mental health of their team members. P07 focused on putting employees in an environment daily that makes them feel comfortable and safe. Stating that all they could do was authentically be themselves and show up, setting the example for how they would like their employees to show up. The overall strategies in the process that seemed to get results were putting the needs of the employees first and moving away from the business needs as the priority.

### ***Perceptions of how COVID-19 was Handled***

Everyone felt the pressures of COVID-19, regardless of status, age, job, or any other differentiating personal characteristic. In the working world, with the influence of COVID-19, leaders had to take on the mental load for their teams and filter information to maintain functionality and stability. The organizations had to make decisions that would trickle down into the different departments. To create new practices to be established for health and safety during the pandemic, organizations needed to apply previous experience with crises and use them for this scenario. The results in the following were participants' perceptions of how the organization handled COVID-19.

Regarding a positive experience, P01, P04, P09, and P11 all explained that they felt the organization could appropriately mitigate the transition from face-to-face teams to



virtual teams. P04 confidently stated that they would not have expected anything different from themselves or the organization, which indicates a positive experience. P09 recalled that the transition was fairly smooth, and overall, the experience was entirely positive for them and their team. Lastly, P11 exclaimed that they did amazingly during the transition. They also stated they were immensely proud of their team's resilience and ability to pivot swiftly during uncertain times.

In contrast, P02, P03, P05, P06, and P08 felt the opposite and experienced a more negative feeling toward the organization and how they handled the needed transition. P02 pointed out that the first thing they would have done differently would have been if the organization had foreseen the significant change coming sooner. They continued stating that the situation would have been better if there had been two weeks or a month before to realize that this (COVID-19) might turn into something bigger and that we might have to shift and do a little preparation.

P03 and P06 agreed with P02 that at the inception of COVID-19, the organization was not very organized. There was no precise information, and everyone was frustrated because they were looking for direction. The organization did not present best practices for the crisis at that time. P05 claimed that the media had done a fine job of whipping up the fear level, but at the beginning of COVID-19, the contingency plans were not there. Based on the company's needs, the leadership did what they could to mitigate the risk as best as possible. Finally, P08 suggested that the organization should have been more conscientious about giving back time to overworked employees, understanding that

COVID-19 was an interesting time. Otherwise, P05, P07, and P10 felt neutral about how the organization handled COVID-19.

### *Personal Values or Opinions*

Some cues from the participants were identified that revealed their personal values or opinions without directly asking about them. The responses were interesting as the participants became passionate about what they thought was important to them. These were all specific to the individuals but had a few similarities. The topics ranged from feelings to interpretations to simple comments on how they viewed others or themselves—some notable comments from some participants can be found in the following paragraph.

Having never left the office and committed to staying in person, P01 stated that they felt that new employees were at a disadvantage because they did not get the opportunity to participate in what they always valued at the organization, which was community. P03 felt empathy for their team members, stating that people perceived a stigma in reaching out for help, where, in actuality, the opposite was true, where reaching out is not a weakness but a strength. P04 commented, saying that letting employees know that you cared about what they were doing was what mattered most. Everyone was afraid of the unknown claimed P05, and the company trod a little too carefully, and they took the failure to perform as a hit to their pride. Another participant, P09, claimed they were not as good as they should have been and felt they failed their team by not socializing enough with their team informally. They beat themselves up about it and spent a lot of time thinking, “What could I have done differently?” For many during the pandemic,

there was no correct answer to that question, which continued to reinforce that flexibility and adaptability were two of the most critical leadership characteristics for dealing with change.

### ***Emotional Responses for Teams and Leadership***

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 extracted deep and unvisited emotions from leaders and team members alike. The experience could be likened to a non-swimmer being thrown into a body of water and told to learn how to swim. With the fear of drowning, many leaders took matters into their own hands to create a more feasible work environment catering to the needs of the employees. People learned to appreciate the efforts of their leaders and teammates with more than a professional level of respect but also a more human response. The following paragraphs speak on socializing, treating employees equally and fairly, trust and team culture, the fear of COVID-19, and some insight into how leadership summed up their experience with COVID-19.

### ***Socializing***

Socializing also became problematic as many individuals working alone at home became more reclusive as time passed. Leadership was forced to figure out how to engage employees and the value of constant communication in current affairs. A handful of participants shed light on socializing and shared their experiences. Realizing that people became isolated for their health and safety also highlighted the lack of interaction people were having. Socializing became almost obsolete without the encouragement of leadership.

P05 claimed that they noticed the drastic difference in socializing, that as COVID-19 dragged on, people were warming up to the whole idea of socializing again. They claimed that we, as individuals, became antisocial and that the situation became very self-centered, which made socializing the group a good thing. Another participant, P07, recalled playing games online in groups like Pictionary, Never Have I Ever, and Three Questions to help with team building. According to P08, meeting remotely to chat about anything but work was another socializing tactic. The events included eating a monthly lunch as a group and talking about life, which for some was difficult, even as P08 admitted as a self-proclaimed introvert. Finding the time to socialize in a world where people were being told to be anti-social was a dichotomy that had no direct answer for leadership during COVID-19.

### ***Treating Employees Equally and Fairly***

Managing employees also meant that there needed to be a semblance of equality and fair treatment for everyone. During the pandemic, individuals could only see what they could through a computer's camera lens. Leadership needed to look at each employee as an individual case. Some individuals were single and home alone, others had multi-generational homes with grandparents, parents, children, pets, etc., and others still may have been couples or any variation of a family unit. With all of these differences, there still needed to be a case-by-case discernment for employees to be treated equally and fairly.

As P01 mentioned, some employees still had to work in person, which meant that they were more at risk and treated differently because they didn't have the option to

isolate in the safety of their homes. There was the thought that these individuals might have needed to be incentivized or receive extra pay to encourage them to continue coming in to work. P05 had a similar sentiment, stating that they wanted to make it work with their employees, each one of them, so they knew that we were willing to work with them in their situations. According to P06, they adjusted schedules so people could get their kids settled with school, and then the individuals would return online for a specific amount of time. Encouraging personalized working hours encouraged flexibility for all employees in their different circumstances.

### ***Trust and Team Culture***

When thinking about a team, one of the most prominent distinguishing traits is the ability for leaders to trust their team members. Building trust is the core of creating a copacetic balance between all team members. The result is an established team culture where individuals on a team can depend on other team members to perform their duties to maintain the ability of the team to complete their goals collectively. Leaders needed to encourage their team members to communicate and be interactive so that trust could be built and team culture was strong. Some of the participants explained their strategies to building trust and team culture in the following paragraph.

When coming to a consensus on decisions, P02 claimed that rather than telling people what to do, asking people for their opinions and coming to a solution as a group got the employees' buy-in and participation. The strategy was to present the issue to the team and open the conversation for solutions, building a strong team culture. P02 stated that having these decision-making tactics, where the team would coalesce on one idea

that made the most sense, helped build team culture. P03 noted that with COVID-19, people were forced to work more independently, so they would encourage more interaction to assist with team building. The situation was weird, as P03 continued, saying that building a trusting, collaborative team is difficult especially when some of your employees you have only met once.

Other participants, P04, P05, and P07, claimed that they got through this and were where we were as we stayed together as a team unified, we did not fragment, we knuckled down, and we decided as a team, we would get through this. Employees on P08's team established their rules of engagement and were open about their shared calendars. They stated that the meetings were important for work but more important to maintain the team culture. Remarkably, the levels of trust and team culture varied from team to team depending on the work responsibilities and requirements of the employees. P09 ran a highly technical team with employees working in silos but claimed that as a leader, you have to make sure your team trusts you. They claimed that your words matter, and if you say you have an open-door policy, you need to be available for your team. The connection with empathy, kindness, and understanding becomes second nature, helping to build resilience, cover vacancies or absences due to sickness, and get to know people.

In another team with P10, made up of introverts, the strategies for building trust and team culture differed. Their team did not want to be on coffee chats or even on camera; they enjoyed their personal space in a controlled remote home office environment. Their team was built on the trust that people would do their jobs and be upfront when they needed assistance, which never required a lot of face-to-face

interaction. P11 closed off their conversation, stating that what improved the team culture was not something that was implemented. The fact that they were all in it together became how they fostered collaboration and unity among team members. Some primary keywords that were imprinted on these individuals' minds were their team's dedication and adaptability. They were inspired on a day-to-day basis, allowing them to show grace for each other during COVID-19.

### ***Fear of COVID-19***

COVID-19 was a terrifying time for the entire world. The fear was not far removed from any situation, whether at work, home, or public. As mentioned by one of the participants, there was a huge fear of the unknown. COVID-19 was a novel version of a preexisting virus. The details of the virus were not immediately known, and WHO put in place health and safety precautions so that the rapid spread would have been curtailed. Whether these restrictions worked or not, there was that undeniable fear lingering for people everywhere. The following expresses some of the feelings that leadership had when speaking about fear and COVID-19.

Some participants expressed true and real fear imposed upon them because of COVID-19. P05 expressed that you would fear being the next victim, questioning if they contracted the virus and if they would live or die. The news continued to present information that made them worry for their families, especially the elderly and the vulnerable. They went on to say that fear became a real factor because there was nothing to stop you from catching the virus, or someone close to them, someone they loved, could potentially die. P06 could decipher that the fear was also so heightened from an

emotional standpoint. People were not sure how long they would be at home, and that added to no one knowing much about COVID-19. P05, P06, P07, and P08 all agreed that it was fear at all levels, personal, family, work, and just fear of the unknown.

### ***Three-Word Summation for Experience***

The mid-to-senior level managers provided some words that could cover feelings towards their experience during COVID-19. When asked to describe their feelings and thoughts around COVID-19, there were immediate reactions in the participants' voices. There was an overall thought process that COVID-19 was not your typical organizational crisis, but that the crisis was on a global scale; therefore, the responses of the entire group come as they have personally experienced COVID-19. The participants three words they would use to summarize their experience with COVID-19 are as follows:

**Table 3**

### *Three-Word Summation for Experience with COVID-19*

Participant	Three-Word Summation
P01	Uncertainty, Stressful, Challenging
P02	Open to Change
P03	Adopt, Care, Communicate
P04	Action is Key
P05	Concern, Plan, Stabilize
P06	Chaos, Difficulty, Confusion
P07	Unprecedented, New, Uncomfortable
P08	Interesting, Challenging, Rewarding
P09	Change is Constant
P10	Marathon, Flexible, Grind
P11	Unchartered, Pivot, Transformative

### **Theme 2: Mitigating Extraordinary Crisis and Change**

As organizations learned to work through the initial shock of COVID-19, there was more stability for employees. Learning to work in the new virtual environment,



connecting and communicating, and pushing through the fear of COVID-19 led to the next stage of the process. Similar to the stages of any project, leadership started with the initiation of the changes where managers needed to start planning for different working situations. The managers then ensured that the employees were executing the plans, as they were monitoring the work, controlling any problems that arose, and following up with any issues to bring closure. By keeping an eye on the work being done, managers in this particular organization were able to mitigate the extraordinary crisis and change that came along with COVID-19.

### ***Managing Challenging Change***

Managers are constantly searching for simple solutions to everyday problems within an organization. From ensuring there are enough people to take on the capacity of work to managing their workloads to keeping track of vacation hours, there are many things on a daily list for management. COVID-19 presented new challenges, and changes were needed to maintain a safe working environment. Between assigning laptops for remote working and learning to communicate more effectively online, COVID-19 changed many small daily tasks that seemed inconsequential before the pandemic. Therefore, managers had to learn to mitigate challenging change during challenging times.

### ***Abrupt Changes***

COVID-19 was an unprecedented time in history for the global economy. Entire organizations were beside themselves and scrambling to maintain their business requirements to function. Looking back to the timing of the influence of COVID-19,

many organizations worldwide started shutting their doors to their employees in March 2020. The WHO started rolling out health restrictions earlier in 2020, causing some individuals to realize that the pandemic was affecting people on a larger scale. The biggest problem was the abruptness of the change. Organizations without prior plans for working in multiple capacities, whether in-person, virtually, or hybrid, all had challenges in different areas because of the speed of the changes due to COVID-19. There was no playbook for adapting to these abrupt changes and adhering to WHO health restrictions, which resulted in organizations having to deal with the abrupt changes as they presented themselves.

P01 recalls that things were changing rapidly, and leadership was trying to stay abreast. They add that the situation was fresh for everyone, and leadership was trying to absorb all the information coming in as quickly as possible and keeping up with the needs of the business by hiring not only to support the volume change but also to support strategic changes in the organization. P02 stated that they agreed the changes were abrupt, and their team's responsibility was assisting everyone transitioning from working in the offices to working remotely. The first couple of weeks were a very intense time just getting everyone up and running, so the initial thought process was that this would change things a lot. P03 stated that after a few weeks of returning from a vacation, everyone was sent home, where suddenly, you are thrown into a virtual world. P05, P06, and P07 all expanded on the abrupt change, thinking it would just be a couple of days, that the virtual environment was an interesting transition, no one knowing how long the change would last.

### *Challenges in the New Environment*

Some challenges that presented themselves in the new environment ranged in different circumstances. Some companies could make arrangements quickly; some had delays for months, and others had to close operations altogether. Supply chain, IT, marketing, accounts and sales, operations, and human resources were some of the central departments that saw significant changes in the organization examined in this case study. Shift work was exclusively in-person, IT work was hybrid, and remote working fell in place for many others, with variations depending on the business needs.

All participants agreed with fervor that the abrupt change created challenges for leadership. The unknown nature of the crisis brought about by COVID-19 included an immense increase in the eCommerce business, which the organization did not have the infrastructure for, according to P01. Dealing with sensitive topics was also extremely difficult as one of P02's team members, who had been sick for a while, passed away. The online conversation was to let the team members know what was happening and note that it was so much more difficult to celebrate and build community when working in a virtual environment. P03 opined that all businesses adopting virtual meetings were overwhelming and hard to adjust to assessing the wellness and needs of people since there was difficulty in reading body language from the shoulders up. P04 opened up, saying that the challenges were difficult to overcome, so much so that they had tears because they were trying to meet all the leadership expectations.

Moreover, P05 expanded on the leadership responsibilities, saying that suddenly evacuating the building was a considerable challenge. What was a challenge for their

team was that everyone needed a computer, and if employee computers were not working, they could not perform, so their team was on the frontline to try to make it all work. The situation was challenging for them even physically as they were working both virtually and in the office, which meant in a hybrid situation, some meetings were virtual and others in person, which had them shuffling around and stressed trying to ensure they were in the right place at the right time. The most exciting thing that P05 said was that the whole virtual experience exploded all the previous ones that probably worked before, and therefore, the outcome was that the company was unorganized, in disarray, and frantic trying to get people working in meetings.

P06 and P07 both were under the same interpretation: one challenge was trying to do the same things online as you would have done in person, and when done in the online environment, you would realize that the task could not be done. P08 and P09 realized that managing some employees was more difficult as getting everyone on board with the organization's requirements was challenging. Some employees refused to meet specific requirements, which in turn caused staff turnover. P10 was aware of the performance of their employees. They were impressed and aggravated with some, noting that virtual environments only exacerbated the employees' abilities. Good workers were excellent at keeping up their work ethics and excelled to higher heights, whereas mediocre-performing employees were slacking off or giving excuses for poor work. P11, being a new manager in a department, claimed that everything seemed uncharted, that no one knew the perfect answer, and that the experience was a lot of trial and error to see what worked and what did not and then to pivot.

### ***Change Management***

Change is an aspect of relationships, business, and life that can be challenging regardless of the situation, as previously stated by the participants. For this case study, the mid-to-senior level managers were approached with questions asking them to change everything they knew within an organization to something else at another level of immediate action. The following explains the change management that occurred.

A very important point for change management made by P02 was that if you embrace change, the change will work well, but if you resist change, coping with changes will be more frustrating. Some leaders were proactive in the situation; for example, P03 mentioned that as they saw the pandemic unfolding, they proceeded to order extra supplies early on in February 2020, such as laptops, screens, and other infrastructure, in case the imminent did occur. For many others, the change management strategy was reactive. P02, P03, P04, P06, P07, P08, and P09 all conceded that there was a great deal of change as the pandemic ensued. There were changes in how people were working, changes in the technology being used, changes to the strategic approaches they were taking, changes in the teams, and even changes in leadership within the organization.

### ***Health Decision Making and the Organization***

WHO created a list of restrictions for people worldwide to follow to assist in curbing the spread of COVID-19. While instructions were being sent out, organizations must follow the restrictions to keep their employees safe. Some organizations followed strictly; others took the recommendations as suggestions loosely, each doing what they thought was right for their business. Essential and non-essential businesses had different

decisions to make for their organizations. The outcome was that health decision-making became a high-ranking decision to be made within an organization.

### *Organizational Culture*

A company's organizational culture comes down to what the company wants to support and promote within the walls of the business. Organizations want to strive to maintain an image or have their virtuous pillars as part of their culture. The problem with the COVID-19 pandemic with organizational culture is that it challenged the core beliefs of the organizations and the individuals who were their employees. The heart and soul of organizational cultures needed to shift, merge, or change to become more flexible or malleable in the face of change abruptly forced onto them when COVID-19 hit.

Organizations were never more responsible for their employees than the immediate here-and-now of the activities that were taking place during COVID-19. Ownership of how customers, employees, and stakeholders were treated was solely on the organization, specifically the leadership.

The organization where this single case study took place prided itself on building relationships and providing a personal stakeholder experience, whether this was the employees, customers, leadership, or anyone else who came in contact with the company, stated P01. With the shift to virtual environments, the organization lost the ability for new members to truly understand why the organization existed and the head office's role in supporting the stores. P03 recalled that the organization was an employer that never would encourage working from home; they had to be in person. Once COVID-19 hit, the organization was forced to focus on what was necessary within the business. The people

drive the business, and if the people are not driving the business, then the business will not go forward because that is what the business is built on.

P05 had some other impressions of the organizational culture during that time, claiming that the company was very good as they attempted to serve the people by adding more sick days to accommodate COVID-19 infections within families. Before COVID-19, there were no sick days, only personal time and vacation days, so one significant positive change that came out of COVID-19 was that the organization changed by adding in sick days. P07 understood that change was not the norm for all staff members, and for leadership, employee participation in communication was critical to the organization's success. The question was posed, "How can we as an organization support you?"

### ***WHO Health Restrictions***

To simplify the WHO health restrictions, there were specific instructions for people to avoid contact with other individuals through social distancing, keeping six feet apart, quarantining, and self-isolation (Singh & Singh, 2020). These were points of intercession with the health restrictions. No health institution could prove that the recommendations for health and safety worked. People of the masses were afraid, and skepticism was rampant. Organizations needed to heed the warnings of these recommendations from WHO to ensure the health and safety of their most precious resource: their employees.

Prioritizing the WHO health restrictions and improving the organizational culture in tandem released a wave of new operations for many organizations. P01, P05, P06, and P07 listed the many things that were put in place to keep employees safe, which included

informing hundreds of individuals not to come back to the office, implementing protocols for onsite employees, there was a sign-in area for visitors for contact tracing COVID-19 cases, implementing appropriate distancing by creating more space, and keeping up with the provincial legislations. They expand on new programs enlisted for mental health, new processes for communications, and new ways to create spontaneous interaction and stay connected to employees. These were all creative ways that organizations implemented new strategies to manage their resources through the implications made by WHO for health and safety. What did this mean for the mid-to-senior level managers' decision-making?

### ***Decision Making***

Making decisions during COVID-19 became a sensitive topic, and leadership needed to be decisive with short turnaround times to come up with abrupt solutions. Should we all go home and stay home? Should we try to communicate over the phone or through video calls? Should we micromanage employee workloads or give them the autonomy to make their own choices? Should we demand in-office hours or have flexible work from home hours? There are so many different aspects to decision-making and also decision-following.

Some managers, clearly understanding the needs of their team members, used their decision-making power to allow exceptions that did not necessarily follow that of the leadership above them. This was because their team dynamics would not allow for the same restrictions, or they deemed them unnecessary. Some teams were more social than others, some people more introverted than others, some leaders more interactive, and so



on. The ultimate decision that flowed through the organizational culture was to do what worked; as P03 stated, we would figure it out as we went along. If it means flexible hours to manage work-life balance, so be it. If it meant coming to work for two days a week or alternating weeks, then so be it. P05 noticed the difference in the organization with COVID-19: leaders could use their discretion with employees' sick days, whereas before, they would need a doctor's note. Lastly, P11 mentioned that leadership had to make quick decisions, which meant there was always room for error. For the most part, the organizations' biggest goal at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic was to keep going.

### *Timing of Changes*

Turnaround times in organizations are always a topic of conversation. With the organization making speedy decisions, there was some discussion about whether or not the decisions were made promptly. How long was the time between finding out about a problem, the immediate reaction, and the final action implemented? Since there was no previous experience with a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, was leadership equipped with the right tools to quickly shift gears?

P01 found that some organizational decisions happened late in the process and after COVID-19, where they thought the organization could have taken a more planful approach to support team members. They felt like the organization did not pivot quickly enough. P02 felt like the organization was not fully supporting the employees until a year and a half into the pandemic. P04 admitted that they felt like the pandemic would have been short-lived, and P10 complained that some of their team members did not receive laptops for up to six months, working on their personal laptops. P11 admitted that some

things were done swiftly; for example, moving to virtual teams had to be implemented quickly, which is how things were moving fast.

### ***Vaccination***

The vaccine conversation did appear in the conversation with some of the leaders in the organization. Prioritizing the health and safety within the organization and the most critical resources, including their employees at all levels. Privacy with employee vaccination status was a must. Disclosing any personal medical history of the employees was a breach of their personal information and was non-compliant with the organization's ethics. The discussion was always a sensitive topic among people as opinions varied greatly from person to person.

P01 and P07 mentioned ethical issues with forcing employees to take the vaccine. Although the organization wanted to promote vaccinations, they did not force employees into the decision, according to P07. Instead, they encouraged employees to get the vaccinations by incentivizing them to take the vaccine, leaving the final decision up to the employees' comfort level. P01 mentioned that they did not initially think that the incentive was the right thing to do, but they did note that the organization got up to 70-80% participation from employees. They noted a significant uptick after the incentive went out and said they would track what percentage participated by shift and location.

### **Theme 3: Swiftly Pivoting to Providing Structure to Business**

In the previous theme, there was mention of the abrupt changes that managers felt were thrust upon them with COVID-19. Moving from one location physically to another and pushing through the communication disconnection, leadership still needed to meet

the organization's goals. The speed at which these changes took place was another speaking point. Learning to pivot during the duress that COVID-19 created was part of the challenges of the change. Leadership was also responsible for continuing to work towards the business goals simultaneously during all of the transitions. Therefore, there was a need for leadership to swiftly pivot and provide structure for the business to continue to run.

### ***Business Continuation and Establishing Consistency***

Working under pressure from external factors can be challenging as organizations constantly learn to adapt. There are already many challenges in a retail organization that need to be addressed for the business to be successful. Between meeting customer needs, maintaining quality customer relationships, keeping the existing employees, and developing a brand and a good reputation while working in a saturated marketplace, leadership lost the ability to continue business in the same manner when COVID-19 started. The new parameters for the functionality of the business changed, and leadership was challenged to keep the business running. The COVID-19 pandemic drove many businesses into a virtual environment that needed changes for business continuation and consistency.

### ***Essential Service and Benefits for Business Due to COVID-19***

As defined by the government of Canada, essential services are those daily services essential to preserving life, health, public safety, and basic societal functioning (Public Safety Government of Canada, 2021). The hardware industry became an essential service as maintenance items on a home are necessary to fix, stated P05. The organization

was deemed an essential service as they provide the materials and tools for consumers to maintain their homes, as one of the basics of daily survival needs is shelter. The organization was deemed essential and had employees working daily throughout the pandemic, claimed P05. The leadership within the organization was constantly looking for opportunities to ensure that business continued despite the heavy lifting caused by COVID-19.

COVID-19 was a trialing time for the global economy, with each organization facing challenges. Overcoming some of the major obstacles, which were part of the restrictions initiated by WHO, some organizations could thrive, especially those deemed essential. This study had significant business benefits for the organization even through the COVID-19 crisis. The organization was declared an essential business and could open its doors to stores and fulfill online sales throughout the pandemic. Monetary growth was not the only thing that the organization benefitted from. According to P03, the experience helped reveal how vital communication with your team is and how important it is to continue conversations. Increased communication was the biggest thing that came out of the whole experience, and it is important to value the time you spend with employees. While P04 and P10 expressed the same with communication, they added that sharing documents virtually was much more efficient than moving around hardcopy communications. Working on projects in tandem by putting items up on a shared screen and receiving all the feedback in one conversation was more efficient overall. There was also the opportunity to quickly message someone as an aside in the new chat technology

that was implemented. Then, the leaders could pull another expert into the online conversation as needed P04 continued.

P06 and P08 stated that the organization was not using video conferencing before COVID-19. There was an initial learning curve, but in the end, they expressed their thankfulness for the software as it moved their team into a place where there was an increase in productivity and flexibility for employees. COVID-19 improved the business by forcing the organization to modernize, but it was suitable for the company; improvements were made to sensitive business areas, including legal security.

### ***Continuing Business as Usual***

The second quarter of 2020 saw many small businesses go under, including businesses deemed nonessential or businesses with too much human contact involved in exchanging their goods or services (Singh & Singh, 2020). Figuring out which companies were essential gave way to lockdowns and enforcement of restrictions for health safety reasons (Fairlie & Fossen, 2022). Once the organization was deemed essential, the next step was figuring out how to continue doing the work. The participants agreed that the organization was doing the best job possible given the circumstances but needed to do more to establish a business-as-usual standard. The following expresses the thoughts of the participants on the topic of continuing business during COVID-19.

P01 explained that the question was always how do we stabilize and support the continuity of the business, including the shareholders who are running their independent businesses. The priority was keeping stores operating and sustaining the functions at the head office so that everything could be maintained as usual. P03 mentioned many

questions about the work environment involving expectations and how teams would get work done. The next step in the strategic plan for P03 was that once how the work was to be done, the doing of the work was where processes could be established and work could be assigned. P04 ensured that their team would review all their projects weekly, keep everyone updated, and see if synergies could be created. The strategy allowed the business to continue, but as P06 contrasts, there was not a business as usual; leaders were trying to keep the business stable, and disrupting business as usual was more of the goal now.

### ***High Demand Low Supply***

Two of the leaders interviewed for this study brought up the topic of high demand and low supply. The mention by one of the leaders was due to purchasing equipment for employees to work from home. There were initial conversations about COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, which were increasingly becoming more urgent. Seeing this as a red flag, P05 decided that with the information about COVID-19 in the news, there would be a shortage of laptops and that they should maybe bring extras. They spoke to suppliers early on in the year and stated that they knew that they would get shorter and shorter supply, which would drive up the prices of the items. P06 mentioned that as the year went on, multiple organizations had supply chain and logistics issues, and they were worried about the resources they needed. P10 noted that at one point during the pandemic, there was just nothing to buy, which is why some employees waited six months before getting a laptop.

### ***Technological Demands for Remote Working***

In any organization with employees working on a computer, ensuring they have what they need to function is essential. As COVID-19 spread and lockdowns were inevitable, the push for employees to work from home was looming. The organization, which was 90% in-person, was abruptly forced to close its operational doors and tell employees to stay home. The chaos that ensued was unpredictable, and the organization could not initially provide direction. According to P04, the situation was a surprise, and everyone had to go home.

### ***New Software and Technological Infrastructure***

To start with communication, new software needed to be implemented so employees could work. All participants mentioned using the Microsoft Teams application as a means of communication and agreed that the software was the most efficient at the time with the most accessible integration into currently existing software. The communication consisted of both online chat as well as telephone and videoconferencing. P02 claimed that everything was being done over teams, whereas some employees were previously using the software only as a messaging tool. P04 and P09 recall that there was training for Teams, which was reasonably easy, and individuals quickly learned how to do videoconferencing and presentations over Teams. P05 enjoyed that Teams provided a level of contact where you could be face-to-face with cameras. P10 also brought up that Docusign was another software to help with legal documents where signatures were needed, such as new hire contracts or financial documents, and the software was not used before COVID-19.

At the beginning of COVID-19, technological infrastructure was challenging for the organization. P01 and P04 explained that not all employees had laptops to take home but should take anything they could to work remotely. P01 said there was a mixture of people working from work laptops and personal laptops because the resources were not there. P04 stated that working on their laptop was too difficult to see and that getting monitors at home improved their productivity. P05 noted that potentially only 20% to 25% of the organization's workforce had laptops, which meant anywhere between 500-700 laptops needed to be configured and ready to go out the door for the employees without laptops.

The proactive P05 started ordering these laptops prematurely in more significant quantities, just enough to keep the organization going. With more laptops, they increased the laptop production, and several hundred laptops were already purchased, which bridged the gap when the organization shut its in-person operations. Almost everyone had a laptop within six weeks, which was incredible work with all hands-on deck cranking them out. P05 recalled disbelief that the organization would be in such a technical challenge for electronic parts, but the immediate goal was to get the employees the equipment they needed. P10 stated that the only stumble for their team throughout the changes was getting the technology in place. Efficiencies increased dramatically once everyone on their team had proper equipment and a quiet place to work from home.

### ***Strategies or Procedures in New Environment***

Leadership needs to adapt to managing teams with all the external factors affecting their team members in light of COVID-19. There needed to be a different



approach to many existing strategies or procedures used to manage in-person teams.

Many things like meetings, spontaneous interaction, celebrations, lunches, team building activities, or social events were no longer possible face-to-face. The following explains their thoughts to identify some of the suggestions that the participants thought worked.

Scheduling daily or frequent meetings, with quick check-ins with team members, happened for P02, P03, P04, P06, 07, P09, P10, and P11. These meetings or scrums were to keep the team informed of what was happening in the organization and let leadership know their teams' workload. P4 mentioned that one of the perks of these frequent meetings is receiving immediate communication on things going wrong that may impact the team so that the team can learn quickly and adjust. P05 spoke about creating shifts with their team, one week in the office and one week working from home. By separating the two teams, they were trying to maintain two different COVID-19 contamination groups, and even though people were getting sick, there was still a group of people who would be constantly available for their services. P06 commented that their team came up with their own best practices and strategies for their team. Their rules of engagement, developed in tandem with their team, allowed flexibility in working hours and produced more productive team members. P06 also commented that they did not think you could have written ten rules of how team members should work, dictating how to act, behave, and operate; they believed you would not want a response like that. P07 agreed there was no playbook for the best practices for leading a team, noting that everyone is unique in how they engage and prefer to engage.

In contrast, P08 worked with their team to create strategies that would work for their team. Initially, the strategy was to survive, but as time passed, they decided to have complete strategies as a team. The strategies developed included (a) when being on video conferences have your camera on, (b) having required check-ins on Teams at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day to let others know your availability, (c) informing the team when you are away from your desk for more than 15 minutes for lunch or other appointments, (d) the team also met twice a week for live updates, (e) sharing calendars and keeping them updated, and (f) having one-on-one meetings with manager and employee every two weeks for personal updates. Others could be listed, but P08 stated these were the most prominent strategies developed for managing a team during COVID-19. P09 adds that on a higher level, daily leadership meetings were implemented for updates, and the learnings from these meetings leadership would take back to their teams for decisions to be made on any pressing items.

#### **Theme 4: Adapting to the Unconventional Workplace Environment**

The definition of a workplace underwent a complete transformation for some organizations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The status quo for the home renovation retail organization in this case study, in terms of working location, was to work in the office. The mentality was there to include in-person interactions as part of the workplace environment. As only 20% of the organization could work from home, the organization had to make a significant shift. The business needed to adapt to an unconventional workplace environment to be successful during COVID-19, which, in this instance, meant that they would be entirely or partially remote.

### ***Working Location***

The location where people worked before, during, and after COVID-19 was constantly changing. Although circumstantial, the organization dictated the recommendations and tried maintaining its business while accommodating the surging COVID-19 pandemic. There were three physical locations where the employees were working, and different elements were required for success. Before COVID-19, in-person work was the norm for employees in the office or the stores. All participants commented on their positive interactions with other individuals, whether on their team or in passing through the office halls.

### ***In-Office Working, Remote Working, Return to Office, and Hybrid Working***

Meetings were held in meeting rooms, projectors were used to share presentations, lunches were held in the cafeteria, social gatherings, and there was lots of togetherness and interaction before COVID-19. P01 recalls enjoying building those relationships in person, face-to-face, with P02 adding that during in-person meetings where you are face-to-face, you can read body language and pick up on things unspoken. P04 recalls the camaraderie of being in person, where they were able to be side-by-side in the offices with the ability to yell over the wall to communicate. P06 mentioned something obsolete but still being used before COVID-19 started: their bell conferencing line for meetings. Nevertheless, March 2020 came around, and everything changed drastically.

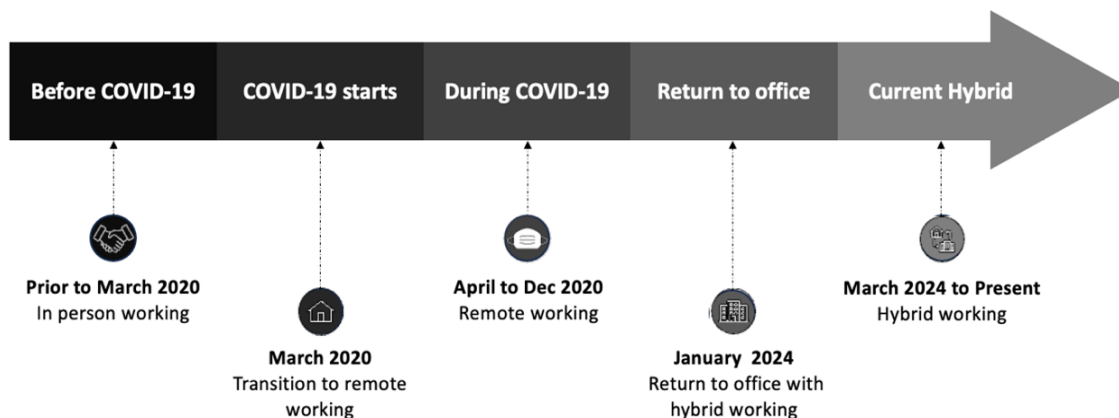
Employees were all sent home, and within two weeks, the head office was 90% working remotely. With new technology and the looming threat of COVID-19, everyone

had to learn to do things remotely. People became familiar with Microsoft Teams as communication departments published more information for the employees to use Teams and the mechanisms around that remembers P01. As the COVID-19 pandemic was at its height, employees became more comfortable working from home as their space was a haven. Equipment was needed to work from home, and P05, P06, and P10 recall the struggles of acquiring laptops and large screens. Some teams left gradually, and others were out of the building in a day, according to P06. P07 mentioned that their employees were excited to work from home, allowing them more autonomy. Most team members were uncomfortable inviting people into their homes with video cameras on at the onset.

Remote working became normal as employees became more proficient with their machines. P06 relates that in the new environment, eventually, the systems become like second nature, and you are not afraid of using them. Some difficulties, as opined by P10, was that in a remote environment, you have to go fishing for the communication you might need from employees, where you need to be empathetic and demonstrate the empathy to say, “Hey, is anything going on with you or as your leader I should be aware of?” P03 claimed that in a virtual environment, you cannot read body language, which makes understanding people more difficult. P04 stated that because of the amount of time spent online with team members, they started to ask more questions to their team members. P01 also mentioned that some of their employees felt overwhelmed with the number of meetings. Most employees were fully remote for about four years, according to P02.

In 2024, the organization decided to revert to a hybrid form of working where employees were required to return to work in person for a specific number of days. Some leaders felt the reluctance of their employees to shift back into the office. Return to office did not come as easy as the organization had hoped. Some leaders had hypochondriacs on their teams who were afraid to come back into the office unless their teammates were vaccinated. Leadership was not allowed to force others to take the vaccine, nor were they allowed to discuss the vaccination status of any of their team members. Others were relieved to be able to go back to what they considered a typical working environment. P06, P07, P09, and P10 stated that going back did not go over too well initially, but with time, people were getting used to seeing their teammates two days a week. P08 also noted that productivity decreases when employees enter the office because of the commute or the increased interaction with other teammates.

Currently, the organization has an active hybrid working environment. P01, P03, P04, P05, P07, P08, P09, and P11 state that they do not think the organization will ever return to 100% in-person as this form of work allows more employee flexibility. Some individuals enjoy in-person working, and some enjoy working from home. However, the organization's ability to continue to build the culture for the entire body of employees is essential. Figure 2 below shows the timeline and changes of working locations for the employees in the organization as COVID-19 went through its lifecycle.

**Figure 2***Working Location Timeline**Parameters of Work*

Emergency procedures had to be done when the pandemic started and maintained throughout the pandemic to get everyone out of the in-person office and safe. While there was a surge in online sales as consumers were now at home and unable to shop in person, employees needed to be hired to handle the increase in work for multiple departments. The amount of work required to complete daily tasks seemed to lengthen the days for some employees, with the strain being on leadership. Therefore, the remaining topics that concerned some participants included hiring employees remotely, returning to the office, and expected working hours for daily work.

*Remote Employee Hiring and Work Hours*

Remote hiring was generally a complex and new experience for many participants. P02 recalls having to hire remotely, stating that they did not even meet the

employee until they first started, but for them, the person worked out. P03 remembers vividly that they hired two full-time employees during COVID-19, and other than coming to the office to say, “Hi, here is your laptop, here is your badge”, they had not seen the employee physically for over a year. The expectation for P04 was that the person they hired needed to fit into the dynamics of their team, regardless of the process, and could do so remotely.

P08 confessed that their entire team had switched out during COVID-19, and remote hiring was the only way they could succeed. They say they had to onboard people during COVID-19 and work together to develop strategies. They also mentioned that the most challenging part of remote hiring is onboarding; some employees had not been in the office since the pandemic started, and ensuring these new employees felt like part of the team was hard. P09 reflects that the organization should have done a better job inserting themselves into the onboarding process. Everyone is working remotely, and there is a need for the new hire to be able to connect with the right people and teams to do their job. P11 remembers strategically scheduling time for people to have casual conversations to recreate those opportunities you would typically have organically in an office as you get to know new people.

Working hours was the last topic during the interviews with the participants. P07 discusses the in-office hours being a standard 8:30-4:30 in a typical working day. Employees had badges that they would scan to go in and out of the building to clock their working hours. P08 expanded on the topic, saying that the teams now have “flex hours,” which meant the same 8 hours of work in a day can start at different times for different

employees. They go on to say that some of their employees would start earlier, and leave earlier, and others later, but the basic rule was that someone had to be available to answer questions for their department. They also felt strongly about the pressure put onto leadership saying that at one point they were literally putting in double time every day, and so was their team. The thought was that the work needed to be done for the organization to be successful and they questioned, "It's not like you could say, no, I am not going to work 12 hours today." P09 was empathetic to the same topic saying that they really enjoy their job, but those work ethics do not mean the interpretation is "Oh my God, you are working 12 hours a day?" Lastly, P11 stated that they blurred the lines of how much time was actually devoted to work, making work hours difficult to track.

### **Summary**

Throughout this chapter, I explained the purpose of this single case study and sought to answer the research question central to the study. The study information was provided in detail for the setting of the study, the data collection through interviews, and the data analysis. There were 11 participants interviewed in this study, noting that saturation occurred around the fifth participant. All interviews were done using the Zoom application, transcribed, and then analyzed. The participants were asked questions to assist in gathering knowledge of their experiences before, during, and post-COVID-19 in terms of developing strategies to manage their team with the abrupt changes from face-to-face teams to virtual teams. To reinforce, I adhered to the guidelines provided by the Walden University IRB so that trustworthiness in the research study was apparent.



Chapter 4 consolidated the responses of the participants, and I used the information to make inferences on what strategies were used in the case study organization that could be used to help cope with the abrupt transition from face-to-face teams to virtual teams due to COVID-19. In Chapter 5, I will complete the study with my interpretations of the findings, any limitations recognized during the study, and my recommendations and implications for positive social change in the community.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

COVID-19 was a time in history that the global economy would mark as a pivotal time in business. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore what leaders prepared for an organization to cope with situations like COVID-19 when abruptly moving employees from face-to-face to virtual environments. The transitional period in between was where a business' resilience was tested. Adaptability, rapid changes, and unprecedented challenges were at the top of every organization's crisis management list of things to do.

Studies similar to this have been performed to capture the essence of the trials and errors of management decisions influenced by COVID-19. To address the research question in this qualitative study, the research design was a single exploratory case study (Yin, 2018) with a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach interviewing mid-to-senior level managers. NVivo assisted with coding, codes, categories, and themes derived from interviews with 11 mid-to-senior level managers. The interviews contained information about when their teams transitioned from their face-to-face teams abruptly into virtual teams to adapt to the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The following chapter includes the findings' interpretations, the study's limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusions.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings in this study reflect the significant perspectives of leadership on how COVID-19 impacted their experience as leaders. The participants reflected on how they felt and what they did as their organization was navigating the COVID-19 pandemic,

from moving abruptly to virtual teams, struggling through the lack of infrastructure, managing workloads, developing new strategies for communication, mitigating the changing course of the crisis, continuing business as usual, the challenges they experienced with technology, trust and team culture, decision making, and ultimately how they could document their learnings for positive social change. At the root of the learnings, there were four apparent themes, which translated into this study's essential findings. The following is my interpretation of these findings based on the data and development of the four themes identified.

### **Finding 1: Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace**

The global economy was going through a challenging transitional period when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. According to literature, the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the biggest world crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the next largest being World War II (Azizi et al., 2023; Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). Through recent experience, society has realized the impacts of the pandemic as a public health crisis, but also having socio-economic effects. Realizing that humans are naturally social, the recorded effects of mandating self-isolation caused severe social and psychological risks, and mental health became a more pressing issue (Brooks et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2020). According to Douglas et al. (2020), the effects of prolonged isolation increasingly aggravated the feelings that occur with forced isolation, becoming detrimental to employees. To alleviate the adverse physical and social effects of COVID-19, the participants in this study described their ability to support, reconnect, socialize,

and build trust and team culture while protecting physical health and ensuring their teams had strong leadership in place.

P01 directly jumped into supporting employees' physical health by addressing the WHO restrictions in the office and understanding the changes in policies and practices put in place by the organization. They state that the organization encouraged the changes by promoting documentation from the government and hoped that employees would understand the need to keep people in the office safe. P03 and P04 pushed that the abrupt transition created a disconnect in communication when employees were sent home. The conversation brings back the notion that in an organization, success is not only determined by monetary gain; Communication is imperative to the measurement of success of the business (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). The problem increased with communication and connecting with employees in the workplace as teams moved from face-to-face to virtual teams.

As described by Dr. Mehrabian, communication consisted of three parts in his model: 7% verbal, 38% voice and tone, and 55% physical cues (Sharma & Tamta, 2020; Spence, 2020). The disruption caused by COVID-19 meant that within an organization, 55% of physical cues were lost when teams were moved to a virtual team environment. To combat this issue, the participants were hyper-aware of the shift in communication and spoke about their ways of handling the situation. P03, P04, P05 considered people as an asset for the organization and wanted to ensure employees felt valued. P04 also said that once employees were safely at home and set up to work, they believed their huddle time became more significant than a simple work update and that the huddle was more

social as time passed. P09 agreed that connecting with employees in a one-on-one situation, treating communication as a way to understand the person's side of things, and asking about family helped to build and strengthen relationships with employees during the pandemic. P07 understood that the transition was sensitive, as changes occurred on all levels of the business, and teams shifted rapidly. P01, P02, P03, P04, and P05 increased their efforts to connect with their employees as individuals. P04, P06, and P07 raised questions about engagement in conversations on video calls and tried to set expectations for their employees by leading by example. All participants agreed that the change from in-person to online was initially awkward for everyone. Transparency, constant communication, and socialization were part of the solution to create work interrelationships to gain employee buy-in.

As individuals, leadership did have their own opinions on how the organization handled COVID-19. The initial adverse effects on work ethics and ensuring that individuals were treated equally and fairly to build team culture were at the forefront. Some participants noted that once teams worked virtually, some employees worked significantly more, working between 12-14 hours daily. A notable mention was that some employees found comfort in working more, as the environment was safe and familiar, but for mental health purposes, in the long run, experienced more significant burnout. P03 and P04 mentioned that some boundaries were being challenged, and awareness was brought to these situations to ensure that employees knew that they did not need to be accessible at any time. The problem was apparent as the pandemic continued, and efforts

to change the thought that employees needed to be always on were counteracted in a few ways.

One specific way to continue improving employee experience was by embracing a new leadership style called Servant Leadership. P02, P06, and P09 called out Servant Leadership to define the best leadership style in the new virtual team environment. As previously mentioned, servant leadership is a style of leadership where the leader takes the employees' needs and puts them first (Bartsch et al., 2020). Servant leadership promoted empathy, a characteristic that needed to be used to keep in touch with employees on a more personal level to help manage mental wellness, according to P09. Out of 11 participants, eight mentioned elements of servant leadership were used to improve the team culture, build trust, and improve working relationships. Implementing servant leadership to put employee needs first created an increased sense of value for the employees as people, which improved mental health wellness.

The participants, as individuals, had their perceptions of how the organization handled COVID-19, expressing their values and opinions while acknowledging the fear that COVID-19 instilled. Their experience is undoubtedly one of a kind, as people with different personalities would be affected by change differently. P02, P03, P05, and P08 suggested that the organization could have taken more precautions or prepared sooner for the pandemic, as opposed to the admirable comments from P01, P04, P09, and P11. The latter group felt that there was nothing that they would have done differently given the circumstances and that they were proud of themselves and their teams. The fear of COVID-19 drove much decision-making for the organization and its leaders. The

participants agreed that there was fear at all levels: personal, family, work, and the fear of the unknown.

Participants used their intuition, personal values, and opinions to help alleviate some of the fear and change that came with transitioning into virtual teams due to COVID-19. P03, P05, and P09 believed there was more that the organization could have done to prepare for COVID-19, whereas P06 believed that people were the same in-person or online. P07 chimed in, stating that the experience overall was uncomfortable and that becoming accustomed to working in an uncomfortable environment was part of the learning curve for leadership and employees. P08, in hindsight, admits that some aspects of their leadership they would have done differently were implementing more strategies for socialization and claiming to beat themselves up because they did not implement the need for more connectivity among employees. Most participants in the study agreed that they should have embraced socializing online with their teams more and should have done a better job. P09, with their very strong opinion, stated that trust is a critical ingredient for a successful team. This statement alone would encourage any leader to determine the parameters for building trust in a team and ensure that trust is part of the team culture.

### **Finding 2: Mitigating Extraordinary Crisis and Change**

Organizations fought to make a pathway through COVID-19, an uphill battle they had no idea how to anticipate. To offset the fear, the organization gathered the information and implemented all the safety measures that adhered to the recommendations for restrictions. Abruptly changing from one environment to another

and facing challenges with the changes, organizations need to adhere to WHO restrictions and apply adept decision-making promptly. The health restrictions proposed by WHO included instructions for people to avoid contact with other individuals through social distancing, keeping six feet apart, quarantining, and self-isolation (Singh & Singh, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic affected global health, society, and the economy on a very rapid or abrupt timeline (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). Some large organizations shifted from face-to-face to virtual environments within two weeks, shutting the doors to in-person for corporations of over 2500 employees, as was the case for the organization in this study (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). All participants in the study agreed that the situation was rapidly changing, and leadership was constantly trying to absorb the information to learn to adapt. P01, P02, P03, P05, P05, and P07 all believed that the information was coming in quickly and strategic changes in the organization needed to be made to accommodate the fluctuations in different parts of the business.

Some challenges for leadership in the new virtual environment were how change was managed, how the organizational culture shifted, and when and where decision-making occurred. One big challenge was learning to adjust to virtual teams, the shift in how to communicate, the frequency of communication, and adapting so that employees felt comfortable communicating was significant. Learning to moderate through difficult conversations, as mentioned by P02, or dealing with the sense of being overwhelmed, as mentioned by P03, there was so much to overcome because of the medium of the communication, stated P04. P05 added that the leadership responsibilities expanded from protecting employees physically and evacuating the building to reaching levels of



technology sourcing, therapy sessions, and learning to do all the same things remotely as you tried to do in person. P02 stood by the fact that if you embrace change, the change would work well, but if you resisted it, coping with change would be more frustrating.

To acknowledge the organization's cultural change, the organizational change theory specifically includes the three-step behavioral change model (three-step model), which includes unfreezing, moving, and freezing to create organizational change (Burnes, 2020). Since the organization faced unprecedented change, unfreezing the status quo opened the leaders of teams to finding a process that worked and then freezing the functioning process. One example that the organization was praised for was including more sick days for employees to serve the people, and P05 added that there were no sick days before the pandemic. P07 said the addition continued after the pandemic to support employees, clearly stating that the difference was not the norm for the organization. Building upon the organizational culture, the central question to employees was, "How can we as an organization support you?" With that steep question, the leadership proved that putting the needs of the employees first, or servant leadership, was the primary way to shift the needle when asked what had changed in the organizational culture after COVID-19.

### **Finding 3: Swiftly Pivoting to Providing Structure to Business**

With the organization on board with change due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership then needed to encourage the stabilization of the business at a team level. Team adaptation includes four core constructs used in the adaptive cycle presented by Burke et al. (2006), which are (a) situation assessment, (b) plan formulation, (c) plan

execution, and (d) team learning (Meng et al., 2023). The team adaptation needed to include the parameters for the business as an essential service, where continuing business as usual was imperative. The conversation led to talks about software and technology infrastructure, with ultimately new strategies or procedures that were put in place to help the teams adapt.

First, the organization was deemed an essential service, which meant that as COVID-19 wreaked havoc on other organizations, this retail home renovation organization could continue functioning. Business as usual meant that the organization needed to maintain the same quality products and services as would have been if no COVID-19 was disrupting the business. Some changes were identified for functionality to be possible, including ensuring that there was technical support and infrastructure for employees to continue working. There was also the interpretation of how to continue working while so many resources had been compromised. With the creativity and experience of the existing leadership, there were specific strategies and procedures, as mentioned previously, that attempted to keep employees working in a remote environment. Extending themselves in most cases to allow for enhanced connectivity with employees, whether through formal or informal meetings, updating expectations of individuals, and being empathetic towards employees by putting their needs first topped the list of most of the participants in the study.

Second, as the organization moved its teams through the team adaptation cycle, there were apparent elements to the situation assessment, including moving everyone to a virtual environment, that signaled a plan to be formulated. Communication was the

steepest drop-off for most leaders and their teams, so some plans for strategies for communicating were set in motion. P08 The strategies developed to create a plan were (a) when being on video conferences have your camera on, (b) having required check-ins on Teams at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day to let others know your availability, (c) informing the team when you are away from your desk for more than 15 minutes for lunch or other appointments, (d) the team also met twice a week for live updates, (e) sharing calendars and keeping them updated, and (f) having one-on-one meetings with manager and employee every two weeks for personal updates. P08 stated that these were the most prominent strategies developed for managing a virtual team during COVID-19. P05 mentioned that working with the team to create the strategies empowered the employees to develop strategies they were comfortable working with.

Lastly, new software and technological infrastructure must be considered when moving teams into a virtual team environment. Reiterating what P05 said was that only about 20% to 25% of the organization's workforce had laptops. Proactive purchasing helped P05 order between 500 and 700 laptops, which needed to be configured and ready for employees without laptops. The laptops were non-negotiable as team members moved their workspaces to their homes. Once everyone had a laptop, monitors that they needed, keyboards, and a mouse, the software to communicate was the next hurdle to tackle. All participants mentioned Microsoft Teams as the software used to communicate using online telephone and videoconferencing features as well as the chatting feature.

**Finding 4: Adapting to the Unconventional Workplace Environment**

The immediate change that occurred when COVID-19 became an issue was with the location of the workplace. Having 90% of the employees working in the office move to at-home work was an instantaneous shift. Initially, the problem was with the technological infrastructure, where most individuals could not work from home, and the second was the environment itself. Adapting to the change from working face-to-face to working remotely and managing a return to office (RTO) plan in a hybrid environment was a continuous change. Lastly, some surprising issues were remote employee hiring and the changing working hours that were unpredicted during the shift.

Communication undoubtedly was the number one problem with working remotely, as the participants avidly corroborated. The previous explanations of the importance of communication, transparency, and knowledge sharing can be seen throughout this study. The reflections on how things used to be in the office, how they were working remotely, and the process of RTO were all hot topics throughout the pandemic. P01 reflected on when they were in the office, and they enjoyed the spontaneous conversations and dialog and being able to walk over to someone and talk. Moving to remote working meant reducing the interactions and learning to re-create some of these via the internet. P06 recalls working with calls and sending emails while working in person and having those face-to-face meetings with team members, and P08 remembered having conversations mostly about work at meetings. The status quo from in-office working had to change when team members moved to remote or virtual team environments.

There were learning curves with the software, the hardware, and the different positive and negative perspectives of moving remotely. According to P04, the remote working environment was fast-paced, as they could quickly have video conversations with others or send a quick message and receive an immediate response. P05 states that eventually, in the new environment, everything becomes second nature once you are not afraid and start using the technology. While P07 understood the initial discomfort for individuals with inviting people into their homes via videoconferencing, getting used to having your family members or in-home interrupts was also something that needed to be navigated. P08 acknowledges there is speed in emailing and chatting, but sometimes, people get stuck and cannot always get their information across. P09, as a self-identified openminded introvert, said that the same policies applied to them, moving from having an open-door policy in the office, where team members were able to access them at any time, to having the same policy with Teams, where their team members were able to call any time, the only thing changed was the medium.

Returning to in-person working and having a hybrid working environment was the last and ongoing challenge presented to the organization regarding working locations. Leadership was learning to be flexible and constantly trying to work within their servant leadership parameters by keeping the interests of the employees in mind and putting them first. At the time of this study, the organization had only begun to implement return to office procedures and felt the reluctance of their remote workers to return in person. P05 had their team working in a hybrid situation due to the nature of work in their department, which meant their hybrid situation worked differently. The organization now

requires employees to be in the office two days a week while working three days remotely, according to P05. They also recalled that the transition did not go well, with employees voicing their resistance. P01 recalls some trial and error with transitioning from remote to hybrid, stating that the process could have been approached differently. P07 notes that the organization did not communicate the RTO plans well across the departments and mentioned that employees would be evolving to work in a hybrid environment.

While adapting to unconventional working environments, some participants pointed out some obstacles. Hiring and onboarding employees remotely was not the first concern when moving to a virtual environment. The reality of the situation was that in order to continue business as usual, hiring and training new employees was part of the process of maintaining quality talent. P02 confesses they did not meet their new hire until they started working in person. P03 recalls the abruptness of their first meeting, saying that their two full-time hires were met at the front desk, given their badges and laptops, and had no in-person interaction with them for the first year. P06 claims they noticed a massive influx of new talent in the organization, noting that the needs of the business changed during COVID-19.

Employees' working hours were the last obstacle that leadership felt bordered on infringing on ethics for the organization. Some employees found solace and comfort in working, where working from home was a safe place to continue to be productive. In contrast, others found the expectation always to be working and available a burden. P08 enjoyed the new working hours as there was more flexibility due to what leadership

called “flex hours,” where there was now a range of times when employees could start and finish. P06 added that leadership could offer different working hours because remote work allowed for unconventional hours. P09 claimed that their working hours bordered on what was good ethical practice in the organization. They felt that being a good worker was interpreted as working 12 hours a day. Others, like P10, felt obligated to be online from 5:30 am to 7 pm to support their teams, getting the participants to the point where they felt like they were always working. While, in general, leaders expected employees to be available between 8:30 am and 4:30 pm, overtime was not an anomaly, according to P09. P11 claimed that they often blurred the lines between working and leisure hours, but overall, the leadership team agreed with P08 that the hours kept were inconsequential as long as the work assigned to employees was completed.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study focused on how leaders within a home renovation retail organization thought they could have used strategies from their experiences with COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face to virtual teams. During the research, four limitations were identified as the study was executed. The first was that the study was done solely as a single case study within a home renovation retail organization. The lack of multiple organizations being interviewed could limit the possibility of generalization. A second limitation was that the study was done only in Canada, which meant the information could relate to other Canadian organizations. While there were no issues with the participants during the primary data collection, using only one organization means there is less ability to transfer the information to another organization.

A third limitation would be the difficulty of reproducing the same study twice.

The study was done with participants who met the criteria of being mid-to-senior level managers working pre-, during-, and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The study may be difficult to replicate without the same timeline and with the same events occurring. A fourth limitation was that the study was based on the lived experiences of mid-to-senior level managers. The participants gave honest accounts of the events in their organization pre-, during-, and post-COVID-19 pandemic. As the researcher, I had no control over subjectivity, the influence of personal biases, or whether the information collected would or would not be helpful to the study.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations for further research are grounded in the study's strengths and the limitations identified. These include recommendations for further research, recommendations for strategies for leadership when abruptly moving into a virtual environment, and recommendations for social change. While many subjects can be approached in this section, the focus will be on the mentioned recommendations. The reason for the scope limitation ensures that the recommendations do not exceed the boundaries of this study. The following expands on the recommendations mentioned above.

#### **Recommendations for Further Studies**

In this study, I had the privilege of speaking to mid-to-senior level leadership in a home renovation retail organization, exploring their lived experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. While their responses were in-depth, detailed, and honest, the result of the



study may not apply to all retail organizations. This is due to the organization being deemed essential by the government of Canada, which meant it could function throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Non-essential organizations did not have the same opportunity, as their doors were shut to the general public. This does not allow for an equal comparison and suggests that further studies should be done similarly with non-essential retail organizations.

If the case study were done as a multiple case study with similar organizations in the same industry providing feedback, there may be alternative results. COVID-19 was a difficult time for many industries in the global economy, and extracting the lived experiences of multiple organizations would benefit the body of literature. Also, as the study was done in Canada, there are other opportunities for research in other places in North America on a larger scale. The United States could be a similar economy on a much larger scale with essential services in a comparable industry that could provide valuable information. A multiple case study with essential home renovation retail organizations in another country, such as the United States, could contribute to the greater possibility of generalization.

Another recommendation would be to maintain the criteria for the participants and, if possible, ask similar questions as found in the study with a similar group of people. This is because reproducing the study with the same environment and situation may be difficult. The sentiments and lived experiences of the participants who experienced a similar crisis may not have experienced something on such a large global scale. The most recent pandemic to occur happened over a hundred years ago, and the

chances of the same events occurring on a mass scale the same way are statistically very rare. Taking the opportunity sooner than later to grasp the opinions and wealth of information from similar participants would be beneficial for future studies.

### **Recommendations for Leadership Strategies**

The core purpose of this study was to uncover the lived experiences of leaders and their ability to cope with abrupt changes in their teams due to external factors. In this specific case, the external factor was a global crisis, COVID-19. Out of the control of many leaders within organizations, COVID-19 forced changes on mass levels for the protection and safety of people. Learning to cope with the speed of the changes, finding solutions in uncharted waters, and performing at the highest capacity level was simply an art for many leaders. Understanding that there was no right or wrong solution for many issues at the time and that trial and error was the only way to see if things worked, words like flexibility, adaptability, empathy, and constant change crept into the vocabulary of many leaders. The following sheds light on the leadership strategies that were successful for the participants in this study that would be recommended.

One of the strategies that can be recommended for leaders who are quickly adjusting to a significant abrupt shift in working location due to a crisis starts with compassion and empathy. Since the transition, empathy or emotional intelligence skills have emerged as influential leadership expertise to support the need for psychological safety in the workplace (Caffrey, 2024). Therefore, in more collaborative environments or dialogues, where warm body language, listening skills, and empathy are valued, the importance lies in the latter, as 55% of physical body language is lost in a virtual

environment (Briggs et al., 2023; Getchell & Lentz, 2020; Sharma & Tamta, 2020). The main benefit is supporting and connecting with employees on a deeper level. When employees are seen as individuals with individual needs, having those needs met helps leaders develop connectivity. Treating employees equally and fairly and putting their needs first fall under the definition of servant leadership and will eventually build trust and team culture. The strategy will develop a workplace that respects humanity and create more team member buy-in where people feel valued and appreciated.

The second recommendation derived from this study includes an organization's approach to mitigating extraordinary crises and change. Following the WHO health restrictions became a significant focus, but to not lose sight of the goals for the business, a culture shift needed to occur. Organizational culture is the backbone of a successful company, regardless of the situation. A company's organizational culture comes down to what the company wants to support and promote within the walls of the business. For change, an organization needs to be prepared to have a culture of being open to change.

Before COVID-19, everything that was status quo for the organizational culture needed to change. Being open to change, flexible, and transformational will bring around the ability to move through organizational change much smoother. To reiterate, Lewin's organizational change theory: (1) explains concepts with plain language, (2) to illustrate and explain the change situation, and (3) focus on the exceptions and not the rules to generate a better understanding of the nature of organizational life (Endrejat & Burnes, 2024). The organizational change theory identified the three-step behavioral change model, which includes unfreezing, moving, and freezing to create organizational change

(Burnes, 2020). These unfreezing, moving, and freezing stages prepare teams to adapt to any upcoming changes at a granular level. The leadership strategies implemented at an organizational level with culture can be moved through the organizational structure and down the ranks.

The third recommendation that could be deduced from the information found in this study was to promote team adaptation during times of crisis and change. Leadership is needed to foster change among team members and support the transition from face-to-face to virtual teams. Noting that under circumstances that lack the duress of the COVID-19 pandemic influences, transition periods could be planned and change managed comfortably for all participants. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, change was abrupt, unexpected, and unfamiliar. Team adaptation is a change in team performance in response to a prominent cue, in this case, COVID-19, that leads to a functional outcome for the entire team (Meng et al., 2023). The four core constructs used in the adaptive cycle are (a) situation assessment, (b) plan formulation, (c) plan execution, and (d) team learning (Meng et al., 2023). The team adaptive cycle encourages leaders to take control of the team in a way that contributes to the team's cohesiveness.

Throughout this study, there have been multiple ways leaders developed their plans according to situation assessments and moved forward with plan execution for their team to grow and learn. The process enabled leadership to swiftly pivot with their teams to adapt and provide structure to the business. Learning new ways to run the business in the new virtual environment and adapting to the unconventional workplace was fundamental to ensuring the business continued to thrive. Without the foresight of

leadership in tandem with the organization, many of the stakeholders in the business would have been lost. Organizational culture and team adaptation thoroughly assisted the organization in conquering an unprecedented situation with the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Recommendations for Social Change**

Retail organizations searching for implementation strategies should document what leadership did in the face of the extraordinary crisis. Leadership reflected on their experiences and suggested what worked and did not. There was an indication during the data collection that servant leadership was an appropriate leadership style to assist employees through the crisis. Implement training to learn the characteristics of servant leadership and use the information to put the needs of employees first as a way to develop the organizational culture. The process could proactively help in situations where new employees are being onboarded in a virtual environment or help them adapt to an unconventional hybrid working environment.

Organizational culture impacts many parts of leadership decision-making as their decisions need to align with the morals and values of the organization. With an inverted pyramid servant leadership style, information and feedback come from the bottom up. Information from the employees can be brought back to the leadership's attention, and solutions can be found for issues identified at a ground level. In turn, leadership can then take the information and assist their teams in adapting to severe problems or crises. In my opinion, successful lines of communication from the source of the problems or issues could potentially prevent more significant problems, improve team productivity, increase team trust, and develop more stakeholder buy-in with the solutions. Change can then be

accepted as the catalyst for improvements as the information comes from the needs of the employees directly facing the problem.

### **Implications**

The following section is meant to describe the perspective on the position of social change in this study. Many opportunities arise in studies where a change in processes, strategies, and perspectives can improve societal situations. To create synergy between the literature, the situation, and the study results, I have carefully analyzed the outcomes for positive social change. As leadership has provided their acute and authentic experiences, some critical points aligned with the need for social change. The following section elaborates on positive social change and the study's methodological, theoretical, and empirical implications.

#### **Social Change Implication**

The initial implication is presented when explaining the implications of social change. This study was done because of the lack of leadership strategies that existed in the literature for managers to cope with the abrupt transition from face-to-face to virtual teams uncovered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2023). The 11 participants interviewed for the study were mid-to-senior level managers managing teams before COVID-19, who participated in mitigating the abrupt change from in-person office work to remote virtual environments. They essentially built the status quo for their employees during unprecedented times, and the results of their responses were gathered in a single exploratory qualitative case study. The individuals in Canada were willing and able to answer open-ended questions about their

intrinsic, in-depth experiences and provide their understanding of the leadership strategies produced pre-, during-, and post-COVID-19.

As a result, the positive social change that can be implemented would be the information for managers or leadership in an organization that needs to learn how to mitigate extraordinary change in the workplace during a crisis. The results from the study point to empathy within the characteristics of leaders in the form of recommending servant leadership. There is also the opportunity for the organizational culture to shift from business-driven to stakeholder-driven, allowing organizational change and change management to mediate challenges in new environments while focusing on the needs of the employees. Lastly, the strategies implemented through the development of procedures during COVID-19 can be shared with new or upcoming managers to lay out ground rules or expectations from employees in a remote or hybrid working environment. Since social change can be defined by how people interact, their relationships, behavior, and normal cultural reactions change over time, the implications of social change mentioned here would benefit leaders and employees in an organization for the most successful business relationships.

### **Methodological Implications**

The methodological implications of the research would include some insights or suggestions for the research methods or designs recommended. In the previous literature, research was found solely on how individuals adapted to virtual teams. The documented processes allowed transitional training, infrastructure updates, technological updates, and socialization in the new environment. The leadership could select volunteers or guide

employees through a carefully planned transition. With COVID-19, information was missing on managing the emotions of individuals suffering from a global crisis who had to change their lifestyles while adapting to moving abruptly from face-to-face teams to virtual teams.

The research was deemed necessary to find strategies to help influence future managers in their decision-making and planning for crisis management, especially in situations requiring a working location transition. Multiple different strategies were consequent from the 11 participants' interviews. A bigger picture of the crisis was developed from the results, including hiring and re-acclimatization for employees returning to the office. Selecting participants within a single organization was better for a single case study, but I realized that opinions were firm and based on emotional experiences. The information from the study was used to identify the limitations and offer suggestions for further research on the topic.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Regarding the theoretical implications of the study, the findings support the literature in that the results may help leaders in similar situations become more aware of what leadership strategies would benefit success in an abrupt virtual environment brought about by crisis (Mitchell, 2023). The core phenomenon behind the study needed to be examined, and theoretical frameworks could be found. The need to adapt to immediate change was prominent when looking at the problem with the COVID-19 pandemic in the organization. Teams were dispersed within two weeks, and working locations changed for everyone in the central hub of the organization. Change was the most significant



factor for everyone at every level of the organization, and adaptability was the number one skill.

For leadership, the organizational change theory presented by Lewin included the method they sought. Taking the three-step behavior change model (unfreezing, moving, and freezing) into account, the company's organizational change occurred in three steps. These steps were recognizing the change in the environment and moving away from what they were doing (unfreezing), creating new solutions to problems such as the work from home situation, learning software, becoming accustomed to communicating and connecting remotely, and performing the same tasks in a different working environment (moving), to stabilizing the new atmosphere and establishing the strategies for teams to function in virtual teams (freezing). Lewin's three-step model provides a pathway for change by unlearning or replacing organizational counterproductive behaviors with functional strategies (Burnes, 2020).

As new organizational standards and behaviors are created, companies become more resilient and less influenced by external factors that affect organizational change (Burnes, 2020). The connection with leadership styles could potentially add to the organizational change theory. As uncovered through the research, the participants leaned towards putting the needs of the employees first. This characteristic leads us to refer back to servant leadership, where employees or core stakeholders are the individuals who help set up the company's success. Lewin focused on field theory, a way of learning about a group of people in a specific environment to map how change occurs in organizations. This was particularly important in learning how a group behaves in a particular setting

(Burnes, 2020). To contribute to theoretical implications, as Lewin noted, this study needed to see the thoughts on the topics as temporary, thus leading to flexibility in how companies can develop their solutions organically depending on the situation (Endrejat & Burnes, 2024). Using the three-step model to develop a broader sense of the strategies and best practices for organizations to deal with abrupt change in team environments, there is the opportunity to add to existing literature on COVID-19 and pre- and post-pandemic teams.

Once the organizational change was implemented, leadership needed to implement new changes in their teams and create team adaptation. Another impression can be made of Burke et al.'s (2006) team adaptation theory, which refers to modifying how a team performs due to certain internal or external stimuli. To the organization's reaction, leadership needs to make decisions on team dynamics, which eventually changes how a team responds to the stimuli (Meng et al., 2023). The need for a team to learn to cope with the changes incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic was vital for the organization's survival (Meng et al., 2023). When thinking of changes on a granular level, teams consist of individuals led by managers who, in turn, report to an organization.

The adaptive cycle presented by Burke et al. (2006) includes (a) situation assessment, (b) plan formulation, (c) plan execution, and (d) team learning (Burke et al., 2006). When using team adaptation, proper adaptation occurs mainly on a team level, consisting of the changes that were incurred at the organizational level (Ybarra, 2023). The team's response initially influenced how team adaptation took place because of the

external stressors for the team, whereby the adaptation cycle is executed (Ybarra, 2023).

Teams tend to perform under stable circumstances, where the input, throughput, and output are predictable (Uitdewilligen et al., 2013). The challenge arises when the circumstances abruptly change, decreasing the team's ability to accomplish its goals, and in the case of this study, COVID-19 was the disrupter (Uitdewilligen et al., 2013). What the take-home message then became with the ability for management to create the team adaptation and roll out new strategies was that the more successful teams must become agile and creative when the opportunity arises to adapt to new unpredictable situations.

### **Empirical Implications**

For this study, the participants were essential to answering the research question. The contributions gathered through the execution of the single case study were imperative for the thought process development. The empirical implications presented through the study were to connect the organizational change theory and the team adaptation theory to discover strategies put in place by leadership that would assist in the abrupt changes from face-to-face teams to virtual teams. Both theories were necessary to assist leadership in grasping change in adversity. Organizational change theory sets the stage for the organization to take the steps to implement change. Team adaptation lays the groundwork for implementing change. The information from the participants on connecting with people, servant leadership, and putting the needs of the employees first was the most crucial for change to occur. Extensive details on the evidence recorded by the participants were described to produce positive social change.

## Conclusions

This study aimed to uncover the strategies for how leadership abruptly shifted from face-to-face to virtual teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was designed to follow the qualitative single case study design, hoping to answer the research question. The interview questions found in Appendix B guided the study through the semistructured open-ended questions. As the study concluded, the findings aligned with previous literature about virtual teams, the leadership skills needed, and the elements required for change at a team and organizational level. What was excluded from previous studies was the abrupt changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and how to assist employees through the change and into a stable work environment regardless of the location.

Some of the conclusions found from the study results implied that COVID-19 had positive and negative impacts on an organization. Some individuals enjoyed the new freedoms of flexible working hours and working from home. In comparison, others were disappointed that some of the organization's core values were being lost with the transition. With permission from the government to continue to function as an essential business through the pandemic, many learning curves occurred as the business needs fluctuated. Difficulties arose with communication and connecting with employees, and as isolation continued, leadership needed to combat the lack of information they were receiving from employees. Leadership was faced with a great challenge to learn to create comradeship online and understand their employees' workloads while meeting organizational goals. For many, the change was complicated; having multi-generational

homes with parents, kids, grandparents, pets, and so on, leadership displayed some commendable qualities. While the global pandemic ensued, leadership leaned on each other, were able to put the needs of their team members first, laid out strategies for team success, and still were resilient enough to meet business goals.

The underlying realization for leadership moving forward is that regardless of how secure the business is, internal and external crises will always occur in an organization. The need to “fail fast” and adapt to new situations meant leadership could make mistakes but needed to learn from them just as quickly. The COVID-19 pandemic, while unlikely, is an example of a crisis that could potentially cripple an organization if certain precautions are not taken for a repeat of the same situation. Also, with the experience of COVID-19, there has been a consensus that working environments have changed forever. Organizations have learned to enjoy the balance of a hybrid situation and adapt to improve the employee experience. Success in organizational change and team adaptation has allowed the experience to be educational and enlightening, and understanding that change is a constant in the business world; the one keyword to get through anything is action.

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## Appendix A: E-mail Invitation to Potential Participants

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I appreciate you having genuine interest to participate in my study. The situation that prompted me to search the literature is the events brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic created new challenges for organizations, for health and safety reasons, to abruptly pivoting into a virtual team environment and adjust from face-to-face teams to maintain business as usual. There is little research on how to lead such teams through this type of problem and manage the dynamics of employees who have been abruptly forced into a virtual work environment due to the global health crisis. The purpose of this qualitative single case study is to learn the strategies or best practices that managers applied to successfully lead employees abruptly forced into a virtual team environment. By course of interviews in this qualitative single case study, I am looking to uncover what leaders essentially did to cope with the changes to their employees at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The focus of the study is to uncover related theories to the strategies that were discovered and how leadership strategically through trial and error found what possibly could have changed for the success of an organization. The information that is uncovered will aid in all future leadership crisis related to abrupt transitions between face-to-face teams and virtual teams. The goal is to aid the community by developing best practices or business strategies that can be taught so others can learn how to cope and drive positive social change going forward.

All the information that I collect in interviews will be confidential, and it will be impossible to identify whose responses belong to who in the data archive. I am not interested in any one person's responses to my questions, the idea is to identify patterns that come to light when the data is organized together. There is a consent form that will be provided to you once your interest in the study has been confirmed. The study will take place over the Zoom app for approximately 30 minutes and will be recorded for researcher information. The information of the participants will remain confidential and anonymous throughout the entire study with all personal information being known to the researcher only.

Your participation is appreciated and will help researchers discover more ways to promote the competitive advantage for organizations as the perception of all stakeholders will remain positive and, in turn, eliminate the stigma of division. We ask that you do not discuss the nature of the study with others who may later participate in it, which could affect the validity of the research conclusions. If you have any questions or concerns, you are welcome to talk with me, Shonelle Ramserran at [REDACTED] or contact me via email [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about subjects' rights, you may contact Dr. Kimberly Anthony via email at [REDACTED]. If your participation in this study has caused you any concerns, you may contact me at the telephone number or e-mail above. If you agree to participating in this study, please respond with the answer "I consent," and I will arrange information so that we can move into the next steps.

Sincerely thanking you for your interest,



Shonelle Ramserran,

PhD Candidate

**THANK YOU AGAIN FOR YOUR ANTICIPATED PARTICIPATION.**

## Appendix B: Interview Questions for Case Study Interviewees

## Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your company and what you perform in your role. What is your interpretation of the organization's goal? Motto? Vision?
2. As the leader of a team forced abruptly from face-to-face teams to virtual teams, what strategies do you apply to support team members' transition to the new environment?
3. When your organization first heard of COVID-19, what was the initial thought process to continuing work and managing employees? Can you please give me an example?
4. Can you please tell me how the strategies or best practices to leading a team have changed or evolved from leading a face-to-face team that was abruptly forced into virtual environments?
5. What can you suggest improved the team culture the most? Can you tell me about a typical day in the new environment?
6. Are there actions or common practices now in place to re-create what it would be like if the team were in the office?
7. How do you think the coping strategies put in place to accommodate the needs of the employees involved help the organization succeed?
8. Do you see any ethical issues with what was put in place to ensure the stability and well-being of your employees?
9. What would you have done differently in terms of your strategic approach to virtual teams, and can you tell me what the experience meant to you?
10. Can you sum up your experience with COVID-19 and the workplace in three words as a leader?
11. "What is your gender?"
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Specify
  - d. Prefer not to say.

12. "What is your age?"
  - a. 25 - 30 years old
  - b. 30 - 45 years old,
  - c. 45+
  - d. Prefer not to say.
  
13. "Please specify your ethnicity."
  - a. Caucasian
  - b. African-American
  - c. Latino or Hispanic
  - d. Asian
  - e. Native American
  - f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - g. Two or More
  - h. Other/Unknown
  - i. Prefer not to say
  
14. "What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?"
  - a. Some High School
  - b. High School
  - c. Bachelor's Degree
  - d. Master's Degree
  - e. Ph.D. or higher
  - f. Trade School
  - g. Prefer not to say
  
15. "Are you married?"
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Prefer not to say

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### **Who are you considering interviewing?**

I plan to perform a qualitative single case study by interviewing mid-to-senior level managers in a single home renovation retail organization in Canada.

### **Incorporation of the exact verbiage provided by the IRB's Office of Research and Compliance**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensures that all Walden University research complies with the university's ethical standards and U.S. federal regulations. The IRB's ethics review and approval are required before participant recruitment, data collection, or dataset access. Walden University will not grant credit for student work conducted without the IRB's ethics approval or otherwise failed to comply with IRB requirements. All student and staff researchers initiate the ethics review process by completing Form A (Description of Data Sources and Partner Sites), and then IRB staff will then provide a list of documents needed for that study's particular data sources and partner organization(s) as per Walden University's website.

### **The revised interview guide, which now includes the invitation, informed consent, introductory statement, the interview, and a concluding/closing statement**

This Interview Guide follows the suggested formats offered by Creswell (2007) and Walden University.

#### **Invitation:**

My name is Shonelle Ramserran, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at Walden University. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. You are invited to

participate in an interview for my research study that I am completing as part of my doctoral program. The purpose of the interview is to help me gather lived experiences and data for positive social change purposes.

**Interview Procedures:**

I am requesting that you permit me to conduct the interview with audio-recording of the interview for a minimum of 30 minutes. Transcriptions of interviews will be analyzed and the information will not be distributed to anyone. If you would like a copy of the interview transcription, I will be happy to provide it to you.

**Voluntary Nature of the Interview:**

Please note, this interview is voluntary, and you have the right to opt out of participating at any time. There is no penalty for ending the interview before it is completed.

**Risks and Benefits of Being Interviewed:**

Your participation in this interview will not pose any personal or professional risks beyond those of typical daily life. There is no benefit to either you or me.

**Privacy:**

Please note this discussion is confidential – your name or specific answers will not be shared publicly, so please feel free to answer as openly and honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers – it is essential **not** to say what you think I want to hear, but what you are genuinely thinking, feeling, or experiencing. The interview recordings and full transcripts will only be shared individually with each interviewee upon request and destroyed as soon as I have completed my study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you want to talk privately about your rights as an interviewee, you can speak to my chair, Dr. Kimberly Anthony. She is the chair of my study at Walden University who can discuss this with you. Her email is [REDACTED].

Furthermore, please share any questions or concerns you might have at this time. If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please respond, “I consent to be a participant in your identified study.”

**Informed Consent:**

My name is Shonelle Ramserran, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at Walden University. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. You are invited to participate in an interview for my research study that I am completing as part of my doctoral program. The purpose of the interview is to help me gather lived experiences and data for positive social change purposes.

**Interview Procedures:**

I am requesting that you permit me to conduct the interview and audio-record the interview for about 30 minutes. Transcriptions of interviews will be analyzed; please note that this information will not be distributed to anyone except for you upon your request.

**Voluntary Nature of the Interview:**

Please note, this interview is voluntary, and you have the right to opt-out of participating at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being Interviewed:**

Your participation in this interview will not pose any personal or professional risks beyond those of typical daily life. There is no benefit to either you or me.

**Privacy:**

Please note this discussion is confidential – your name or specific answers will not be shared publicly, so please feel free to answer as openly and honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers – it is essential **not** to say what you think I want to hear, but what you are thinking, feeling, or experiencing. The interview recordings and full transcripts will only be shared individually with each interviewee upon request and destroyed as soon as I have completed my study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you want to talk privately about your rights as an interviewee, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is [REDACTED]. Furthermore, please share any questions or concerns you might have at this time. If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please reply to this e-mail with the words, “I consent to be a participant in your identified study.”

**Introductory Statement**

Hello, I hope this note finds you well. As you know, my name is Shonelle Ramserran, I am a Ph.D. candidate at Walden University. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As part of my dissertation, I will be asking questions to conduct an in-depth qualitative research interview. I am seeking friends and family members that could participate as “interviewees” for one of my course assignments. Would you be

interested in assisting? The practice will include completing an Informed Consent statement (will be sent via e-mail) and allowing me to e-mail you a list of questions/interviews. The whole process should take no more than 30 – 40 minutes of your time. Please let me know if you would like to participate. You can contact me by phone at [REDACTED], e-mail at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

### **The Interview**

**Identified Study's Research Question** - What strategies do leaders within an organization now think they could have used during COVID-19 to adapt to an abrupt transition from face-to-face teams into virtual teams?

### **Revised Interview Questions**

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me about your company and what you perform in your role. What is your interpretation of the organization's goal? Motto? Vision?
2. As the leader of a team forced abruptly from face-to-face teams to virtual teams, what strategies do you apply to support team members' transition to the new environment?
3. When your organization first heard of COVID-19, what was the initial thought process to continuing work and managing employees? Can you please give me an example?
4. Can you please tell me how the strategies or best practices to leading a team have changed or evolved from leading a face-to-face team that was abruptly forced into virtual environments?



5. What can you suggest improved the team culture the most? Can you tell me about a typical day in the new environment?
6. Are there actions or common practices now in place to re-create what it would be like if the team were in the office?
7. How do you think the coping strategies put in place to accommodate the needs of the employees involved help the organization succeed?
8. Do you see any ethical issues with what was put in place to ensure the stability and well-being of your employees?
9. What would you have done differently in terms of your strategic approach to virtual teams, and can you tell me what the experience meant to you?
10. Can you sum up your experience with COVID-19 and the workplace in three words as a leader?

### **Closing Statement**

Thank you for your time today; it was greatly appreciated. This now concludes our interview. In the next few days, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for your review, and you will have the opportunity to make any necessary edits, and you can return the revised document to me via e-mail.

### **In which format to conduct the interview with a justification for your choice**

I will utilize Zoom interview process to conduct the interviews. The purpose of using the Zoom application is mainly due to the ability to record the interview in real time. Like phone interviews, the ability to speak in real time using the interview guide

will provide structured conversation and ensure that the researcher gets in-depth, detailed data that is needed to draw conclusions.

**Choosing and coordinating a peer debrief with one of your classmates, which can be by phone (preferably) or e-mail and will occur after you have collected your data**

I will conduct a peer debrief and interview with my chair and second chair once the data is collected.

### **Peer Debriefing**

I appreciate the time you are taking out of your day to speak with me. I am looking to debrief the information I have collected with you and the team to ensure the validity of the information gathered. The hope is that the data is of high quality and can be used to answer the research question and create solutions for the positive social change that I am trying to achieve.

## Appendix D: Codes, Categories, and Themes

**Table A4***Codes, Categories, and Themes*

No.	Code	Category	Theme
1	Supporting Employees Physical and Mental Health	Professional Relationship Management	Theme 1- Bringing Humanity Back into the Workplace
2	Connecting with Employees		
3	Ethical Issues and COVID		
4	Leadership Styles	Leadership Perceptions of COVID-19	
5	Perception of how COVID was Handled		
6	Personal Values or Opinions		
7	Socializing	Emotional Responses for Teams and Leadership	
8	Three Word Summation for Experience		
9	Treating Employees Equally and Fairly		
10	Trust and Team Culture		
11	Fear of COVID		
12	Abrupt Changes	Managing Challenging Change	Theme 2- Mitigating Extraordinary Crisis and Change
13	Challenges in the New Environment		
14	Change Management		
15	Decision Making	Health Decision Making and the Organization	
16	Organizational Culture		
17	Timing of Changes		
18	Vaccination		
19	WHO Health Restrictions		
20	Benefits for Business due to COVID	Business Continuation and Establishing Consistency	Theme 3- Swiftly Pivoting to Providing Structure for Business

*(table continues)*

**Table A4 cont.***Codes, Categories, and Themes*

No.	Code	Category	Theme
21	Essential Service		
22	Continuing Business as Usual		
23	High Demand Low Supply		
24	New Software	Technological Demands for Remote Working	
25	Strategies or Procedures in New Environment		
26	Technological Infrastructure		
27	Hybrid Working	Working Location	Theme 4- Adapting to the Unconventional Workplace Environment
28	In-Office Working		
29	Remote Working		
30	Remote Employee Hiring	Parameters of Work	
31	Return to Office		
32	Work Hours		