

DISSERTATION

LEADING THROUGH TRANSITION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HIGHER
EDUCATION LEADERSHIP BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

LEADING THROUGH TRANSITION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This qualitative study explores how higher education leaders at one land-grant university navigated the unprecedented disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by Bridges' Transition Model (2017) and supported by the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and Trait and Behavior Theories (Judge et al., 2002; DeRue et al., 2011), the research examines leaders' psychological adaptation and leadership practices during crisis. Drawing on ten interviewee participants across three time points (Spring 2020, Spring 2021, and Fall 2025), the study investigates how leaders responded to team members on individual and collective levels, how their traits, behaviors, and approaches shifted or remained consistent, and what tools or strategies emerged as most supportive during organizational transitions. Findings highlight the critical role of adaptability, empathy, and communication in sustaining team effectiveness and resilience. This research contributes to the limited comparative literature on higher education leadership before, during, and after crises, offering theoretical and practical insights into leadership strategies that foster organizational stability and growth in times of disruption.

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helped me navigate the logistics with balancing work and life. Both brothers took time to meet at coffeeshops with me for writing sessions. My youngest sister, Elizabeth, stepped in to edit my drafts, which meant so much to me.

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To all the leaders who are navigating challenging times, I hope that this paper holds some value and resonates with you in some way.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

From Dantès to Dissertation: A Journey of Transformation

Years ago, I read *The Count of Monte Cristo* and found myself relating to the main character, Edmond Dantès. He was hard-working and kind, yet naïve, and because he lacked education and awareness, he was betrayed and imprisoned. During his imprisonment, he met Abbé Faria, who became his mentor, and through this relationship, Dantès became educated. He learned history, philosophy, language, and strategy. That painful experience of betrayal and imprisonment changed him. He began to see the truth of what had happened and why. When he escaped, he struggled with anger and grief, driven by revenge. However, his story is about more than revenge. It is a story that delves into themes of growth, transformation, redemption, and the power of learning. My doctoral journey has been filled with many highs and lows, shaped by struggle, strengthened by mentors, and defined by learning (Dumas, 2003).

Like Dantès, my journey began with passion, purpose, drive, and heart, but also with gaps in knowledge that could only be filled through lived experience and time. This dissertation is the product of years of professional transitions, personal growth, and thoughtful mentorship. Throughout this journey, I have faced challenges, disappointments, and setbacks, like any person navigating life's path, but I have also experienced tremendous mentorship that has helped me process and understand both the professional and personal journey. Across this dissertation I describe how I constructed the study's interpretations from the data rather than implying they simply "emerged," aligning with my qualitative stance. This research study was built upon a qualitative research course in the spring of 2020, when I thought I would collect a few qualitative

interviews for the class. It started as a small project and evolved into a multi-year dissertation with data gathered across three phases: before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework Overview

Bridges' Transition Model (2017) is central to this study and offers a framework for understanding how people experience change (an external process). It breaks transitions (an internal process) into three phases: Endings, Neutral Zones, and New Beginnings and highlights the importance of psychological adaptation. In the Ending phase, individuals let go of identities, habits, and structures. This stage is accompanied by emotions like fear or resistance. The Kübler-Ross Model (1969) which is used to understand reactions to significant changes or loss parallels this stage, highlighting five emotions: (1) denial, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression, and (5) acceptance. Together, Bridges' Transition Model (2017) and the Kübler-Ross Model (1969) highlight the emotional experiences that accompany transitions.

The Neutral Zone, often called the "wilderness phase," is a time of disorientation, confusion, and ambiguity. This is the most critical phase, and it involves loss and letting go. As I learned from Dr. Lynham during my first semester, one cannot remain here too long, nor rush through it. It is also a time of creativity, learning, and opportunity. The Neutral Zone can entail both professional changes (i.e. changing jobs, waiting for next steps after graduation, or in-between leadership roles) or personal (i.e. adjusting after a move, recovering from the loss of a loved one, or finding your way after the end of a meaningful relationship).

For optimal performance in the New Beginning, one must strike the balance of learning and preparing during the Neutral Zone, without getting lost in it. The goal is to launch into the New Beginning with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. For leaders, understanding these phases can aid in guiding individuals on teams through uncertainty (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) complements Bridges' Transition Model (2017) by highlighting how individuals' five basic needs of (1) physiological needs (i.e. food, water, shelter etc.), (2) safety, (3) belonging, (4) esteem, and (5) self-actualization must be met for people to function optimally. Additionally, this research study draws on Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011). These frameworks help explain how leaders and individuals on teams think, feel, and act during crises.

Study Purpose and Scope

This dissertation explores leadership and team dynamics through the cognitive (thinking) (Judge et al., 2002), behavioral (actions) (DeRue et al., 2011), and affective (feelings) (Kübler-Ross, 1969) lenses that leaders experienced before (Ending), during (Neutral Zone), and after (New Beginning) a crisis (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Eger, 2017; Frankl, 1946; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943; Northouse, 2016). It focuses on higher education leadership responses throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and is a qualitative study that is anchored in real-world examples coupled with theoretical knowledge.

Figure 1 demonstrates the cognitive (thinking) (Judge et al., 2002), behavioral (actions) (DeRue et al., 2011), and affective (feelings) (Kübler-Ross, 1969) factors that shape leadership responses during organizational transitions. This figure shows how leaders' emotional states impact their cognitive thought processes which in turn impact their behaviors.

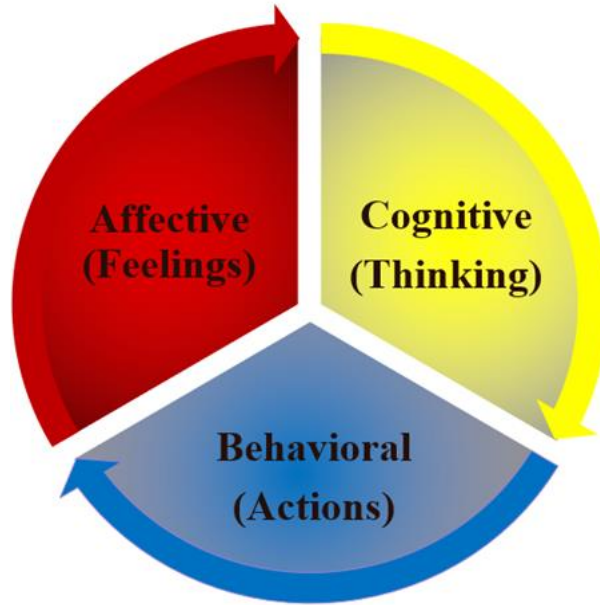


Figure 1. Affective (Feelings), Cognitive (Thinking), and Behavioral (Actions) Model

A pandemic is a distinct kind of crisis for leaders and teams because it hits fast and then lasts a long time, draining energy across multiple academic years. It disrupts everything at once; for example, in my experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the admissions office, travel, supply chains, campus operations, and more were immediately and extensively affected. A pandemic makes it challenging to apply previously applied solutions because it is a unique type of crisis. Public-health rules shifted people into remote work and learning spaces, which made connection and communication more challenging. Leaders had to first secure basic needs (i.e. health and safety, childcare, reliable internet and devices) before higher-level goals were even possible. Rules and guidance also changed frequently at institutional, state, and federal levels, forcing constant re-coordination. The academic admissions calendars were impacted by shifting testing policies, deadlines, and even mailroom logistics. Unlike other crises, there was no clear opponent, so the crisis could not be blamed on anyone or anything. It required continual adaptation. These aspects of the COVID-19 crisis shaped the analysis for this study and highlight this dissertation's specific contribution to pandemic-era leadership.

The study not only examines affective responses such as fear, grief, empathy, and resilience (Kübler-Ross, 1969) but also explores cognitive aspects, including decision-making, problem-solving, and strategic thinking, and analyzes (Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016) the resulting behavioral actions, such as communication strategies, policy making, and supportive team interventions (DeRue et al., 2011). While centered on leaders' lived experiences before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, this study also draws on broader leadership case-studies to illustrate key leadership themes during times of uncertainty. This study examines how higher education leaders responded to crisis, focusing on the consistencies and shifts in their leadership traits, behaviors, and approaches before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It also identifies practical tools and strategies constructed from the data to inform how leaders can effectively support individuals and teams through organizational transitions.

A large body of literature addresses leaders and teams operating under extreme conditions, such as polar explorations and firefighter teams. However, comparative literature before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic is scant. The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to the limited comparative literature on higher education leaders before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand how leaders navigate transitions effectively, this study draws upon Bridges' Transition Model (2017). The model outlines three phases: Endings, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning. In the Ending phase, individuals let go of old identities, habits, or structures. This stage is often marked by resistance, fear, and grief. This study integrates themes from the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), which identifies the arc of emotions that accompany the three phases outlined by Bridges' Transition Model (2017). The Neutral Zone is the in-between period, where

the old is gone, but the new has not fully taken shape. It is often disorienting, but also a time of creativity. Finally, the New Beginning involves embracing new roles, strategies, and purpose.

Researcher Positionality

I was born in Goleta, California, and grew up in Grass Valley as the third oldest in a family of thirteen children that valued education and hard work. I grew up working in the family's business. Those early formative years instilled in me a strong work ethic. As the summer sun was rising, I would bound out of bed eager to hop into my dad's '59 Chevy to be a part of the team. I used the work ethic I learned growing up to pay my way through my undergraduate studies. I earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology with an emphasis in Education from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, where my interests in science, teaching, and human development converged. Early in my career, I designed outdoor science curricula in the redwoods of Northern California and taught at the Children's School of Science in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. In 2010, I moved to Fort Collins, Colorado, where I served as a teacher and administrator before earning a Master's in Education and Leadership from Colorado State University in 2018. My leadership experiences expanded as a Dean of Students in Denver and later through roles in admissions, recruitment, and graduate teaching.

My professional path has been shaped by a willingness to step into unfamiliar spaces, take on challenges, and learn through action. Over time, I have come to understand that authenticity is a key component of leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic and the doctoral process deepened this understanding, transforming my views through lived experiences. These years introduced me to my limitations and required me to tap into resilience, collaboration, and self-compassion. I learned adaptability and the value of building relationships.

In May 2022, I hiked the Camino de Santiago in Spain with my youngest brother. We walked 15-20 miles a day through steep terrain, often tested by exhaustion, blisters, and unpredictable weather. Along the way, we built friendships with fellow pilgrims from around the world who taught me that when you are surrounded by good people you can accomplish anything. The Camino became a lived metaphor for leadership and transition. It reinforced that progress is not measured by speed or achievement but by relationships along the journey. My leadership philosophy is grounded in the lessons I have learned along the way. However, Theodore Roosevelt's (1910) "Citizenship in a Republic" address often called "The Man in the Arena" best captures my philosophy:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena: whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds...who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

I have found that growth comes from showing up, learning, and continuing despite setbacks. The doctoral journey, like Roosevelt's arena, has been a test of endurance.

While this quote is the inspiration behind my leadership philosophy there are also leaders from my personal and professional life who encompass qualities that I respect. In my personal life my father's quiet strength and ability to command respect in any environment has always inspired me. In professional settings, historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, have shown me that individuals can transform hardship into collective purpose with perseverance. These influences

parallel the frameworks that guide my research: Bridges' Transition Model (2017), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), and the Kübler-Ross Model (1969). Like the leaders in my study, I have experienced the affective phases of Endings, uncertainty of the Neutral Zone, and the renewal of New Beginnings. These transitions have shaped my belief that leadership is a relational process that is rooted in empathy, guided by purpose, and strengthened through change.

Purpose and Rationale

While there is a large body of literature that addresses leadership and teams in extreme conditions, comparative literature regarding higher education leadership and teams functioning during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic is scant. The scarcity of comparative literature on leaders and teams at higher education institutions before, during, and after the pandemic is due to the infrequency of pandemics on a global scale. The last major pandemic, the Spanish Flu, occurred over a century ago in 1918 (Barry, 2004). The gap between pandemics offers limited opportunities for researchers to delve into leadership and team dynamics during this type of crisis. This has hindered the ability of researchers to conduct studies that are based on a real-world global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for researchers to examine this phenomenon in real time. I positioned the pandemic as a unique crisis context and highlight how effective leaders responded throughout each phase of the transition.

Participant Overview

This research study draws on interview data from ten campus and state leaders at one large western LGU collected during three semesters: (1) Spring 2020 (pre-pandemic) - six interviews, (2) Spring 2021 (during pandemic) - three interviews, and (3) Fall 2025 (post-pandemic) - five interviews.

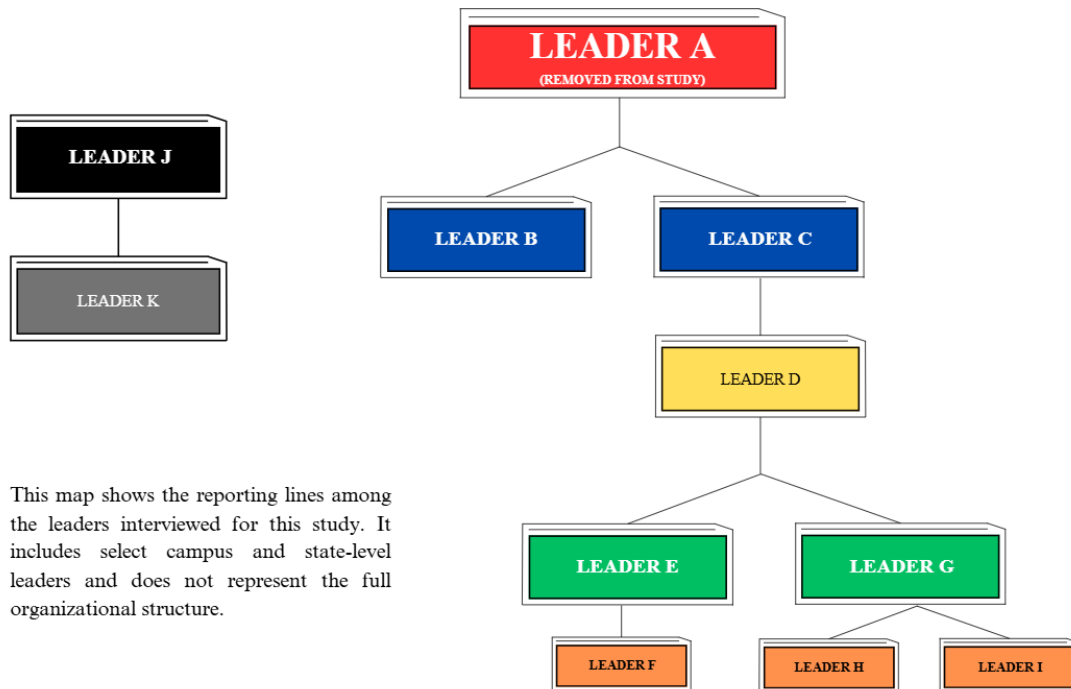


Figure 2. Hierarchy of Leader Participants

In this study, a leader is someone who, in Northouse's (2016) terms, influences a group to achieve a common goal. In other words, a leader is someone whose impact is not limited to a job title. An administrator or manager according to Northouse (2016) primarily organizes, plans, and maintains order. Practically, I identified leaders as people who held formal roles with unit or institution level decision making abilities and were named by others as exercising influence beyond their role. I also asked participants to describe their leadership work and scope. I considered those descriptions alongside formal roles when constructing cases.

Many of the leaders referred me to other leaders to interview for this qualitative study. My interviews included prompts about collaboration and interdependencies (i.e. campus and state partners). I did not ask participants to rate colleagues. When they spontaneously mentioned peers (positively or critically) I used those remarks only as context to help understand the individuals in the study in a comprehensive manner rather than as stand-alone evidence of anyone's performance.

Unfortunately, due to technological corruption and the deletion of a university cloud-storage system, no participant data was retained across all three phases of the study. Most participant data were preserved for one or two phases, which ultimately reflects the imperfect yet authentic nature of a research project that emerged during and after a global crisis. Additionally, it should be noted that two participants were included from outside the university setting. Both interviewees were affiliated with state-level leadership departments. These interviewees were intentionally selected because they collaborated closely with the university leadership team to revise statewide policies regarding standardized testing during the pandemic. Their inclusion strengthens the contextual validity of the data by capturing the interorganizational dynamics and policy-level decision-making that influenced institutional leadership responses. Including these perspectives allowed for a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the environment in which the university leaders operated. This approach is aligned with qualitative study procedures for contextual depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Table 1

Summary of Retrieved Interview Data By Participant and Phase

Participant	Notes	Transcript 1 ('20)	Narrative	Transcript 2 ('21)	Transcript 3 ('25)
Leader A	-	-	✓	-	Left university
Leader B	-	-	✓	✓	Passed away
Leader C	✓	-	✓	-	Left university
Leader D	✓	-	✓	-	✓
Leader E	-	✓	-	-	✓
Leader F	✓	-	✓	-	✓
Leader G	✓	-	✓	-	Left university
Leader H	✓	-	✓	-	✓
Leader I	✓	-	✓	-	✓
Leader J	-	-	-	✓	-
Leader K	-	-	-	✓	-

Ultimately, this study focuses on highlighting shifts and consistencies in leadership traits, behaviors, and approaches before, during, and after the crisis. It provides insights into effective leadership strategies for navigating organizational transitions and contributes to the limited comparative literature on leadership across crisis stages, offering practical tools for leaders to support individuals and teams through crisis situations.

This study uses Bridges' Transition Model (2017) and integrates several supporting frameworks to highlight leaders navigating the Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning, integrating Trait and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016). It emphasizes the importance of psychological adaptation during crisis, ensuring both academic rigor and practical relevance. The following figure illustrates theoretical and conceptual frameworks that informed the development of the research questions.

A Conceptual Framework and Pedagogical Framework



Figure 3. A Visual Representation of the Frameworks Guiding this Study

This research study addresses these research questions:

1. How did higher education leaders at one university respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and transition?
 - a. How did these leaders perceive their responses during this crisis?

- b. How did these leaders perceive their influence on the capacity of their teams to perform effectively during this crisis?
2. How did these leaders' traits, behaviors, and approaches shift or remain consistent throughout the crisis and transition?
 - a. What leadership traits, behaviors, and approaches did these leaders view to be supportive or constraining during the crisis?
 - b. What leadership traits, behaviors, and approaches did these leaders view to be supportive or constraining of effective *team performance* during the crisis?
3. How do these data inform tools and strategies that leaders can use to support individuals and teams during organizational transitions?

Historical Precedent for Crisis Leadership

To provide a historical lens, this chapter references past leadership during the Spanish flu pandemic. In the autumn of 1918, the University of Notre Dame faced the impact of the Spanish Flu pandemic. President Cavanaugh initially downplayed the severity to maintain stability, but he soon recognized the urgency of the situation and implemented strategic measures to ensure the safety and well-being (Fosmoe, 2020) of the university community while maintaining continuity with university operations. This example parallels more recent responses at a large western LGU. By prioritizing health and stability while adapting operations, Cavanaugh guided the community from an Ending through a Neutral Zone toward a New Beginning (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Fosmoe, 2020).

Cavanaugh's leadership offers a blueprint for modern higher education leaders who, like him, faced the challenge of balancing public health concerns with the need to sustain educational continuity. His actions ranged from minimizing the perceived threat to ensuring stability and

making difficult decisions on curbing physical gatherings such as postponement of football games (Fosmoe, 2020). These actions mirror the decisions faced by higher education administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders throughout time had to navigate the fine line between transparency and reassurance, balancing the need for stability with the urgent call for adaptation, a consistent theme in crisis management (Mitroff, 1987). While the Notre Dame case study provides an institutional example of crisis leadership within higher education, the following vignette illustrates how a leader outside the academic setting navigated uncertainty.

Effective Leadership: Ernest Shackleton Vignette

Shackleton's expedition advertisement read, "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success" (Watkins, 1949, p. 1). And so began one of the most remarkable examples of a leader setting expectations for a rewarding yet potentially perilous expedition. On a frigid January morning in 1915, Ernest Shackleton and his Antarctic expedition team experienced tremendous hardship when their vessel, the *Endurance*, became locked in by ice. Shackleton initially intended to complete the first continental crossing of Antarctica. However, when encountering this crisis, the team's purpose quickly shifted from expedition to survival mission. The harsh weather conditions plagued the expedition crew, diminishing resources and increasing the possibility of mutiny. Shackleton devised a plan. He selected the men most likely to mutiny to travel with him and left his loyal team members behind. Shackleton then led this small group across treacherous terrain to a remote supply station to return for the remaining crew (Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson, 2015; Lansing, 2014; Smith; 2015). Shackleton kept the mutineers with him rather than letting them impact the entire team and cause havoc while he was away. Consequently, he navigated a potential team of mutineers to a supply outpost without

incident. He returned to successfully rescue the loyal men left behind. The story of Shackleton and the *Endurance* is an example of leadership during a crisis (Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson, 2015; Lansing, 2014; Smith, 2015).

Defining Purpose

Consider Shackleton's leadership. His initial purpose led the crew to disaster; the *Endurance* became locked by ice under harsh weather conditions (Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson, 2015; Lansing, 2014; Smith, 2015). However, Shackleton defined a new purpose and led the crew successfully to safety. Northouse (2016) defines *leadership* as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016). Defining a purpose is crucial because it gives a team direction (Leal Filho et al., 2018; Haber, 2012; Komives & Wagner, 2017; Northouse, 2016; Sharlow et al., 2009). Influential leaders listen, build trust, and develop structures that align with the team's purpose (Northouse, 2016).

Influence and Persuasion

Shackleton understood the value of persuasion. He strategically influenced and persuaded his team to follow his plan. Ury is the co-founder of Harvard's Negotiation Program. Ury (2013) outlines the five principles of persuasion: *purpose, perceptions, problem solving, proposition, and process*. He suggests that these five principles ease conflict and increase influence. In terms of *purpose*, he emphasizes the value of looking forward and not backward. According to Smith (2015), a polar expedition author, Shackleton sorted through over 5,000 applications to fill 50 crew member positions. He harnessed his crew members' skill sets effectively; anthropologists, biologists, cooks, officers, navigators, engineers, meteorologists, surgeons, carpenters, and even a stowaway (Smith, 2015).

During conflict, Ury recommends asking, "Who can do what tomorrow morning to move this situation forward to resolution?" (Ury, 2013). Shackleton knew his crew and thus their *perceptions* of the situation, which allowed him to safeguard any areas of weakness among them. He recognized the crew members did not have either the training and, consequently, the benefit of highly honed executive functioning skills during the crisis and were responding in a manner consistent with this deficit. In other words, he recognized his crew was manifesting the fight or flight response (Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson, 2015; Lansing, 2014; Smith, 2015). He *problem-solved* by making the decision to trek over the frigid Antarctic terrain to reach the supply outpost, while at the same time presenting a *proposition* that protected each member of the crew because he recognized their strengths and limitations. Throughout the whole *process* he safeguarded not only the relationships, but also the well-being of each member of the crew. Interestingly, crew members from Shackleton's expedition chose to join him on later voyages; this recurrence is often interpreted by historians as evidence of perceived trust being built by a leader with a team which is a testament to his influential, persuasive, and servant leadership ability (Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson, 2015; Lansing, 2014).

Defining Roles and Expectations

Defining roles and expectations as soon as a team forms is critical (Bass, 1990; Biddle, 1979; Rodd, 1997). Leaders who take the time to define roles and discuss expectations set a foundation for team members to contribute to the overall purpose and mission of the organization (Kozlowski et al., 2009).

Establishing norms and expectations for teams early minimizes confusion and maximizes the team's potential to be effective (Mumford, 2007). Furthermore, leaders need to examine

relationship dynamics that impact the input and outputs of a team (Morgeson et al., 2010; Northouse, 2016).

Legislative Context

While the primary focus of this research study is not built on the legislative aspect of higher education leadership, it is important to acknowledge the policy that shaped higher-education leadership during the pandemic. Integrating the legislative background of higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is important from a policy standpoint. In examining the response of higher education leaders to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of individual and team-level leadership, and the influence on effective team performance, an analysis of leadership dynamics during the crisis is important. This demonstrates the need for leaders to exhibit adaptability in their leadership.

For example, many state-level leadership teams, in partnership with universities, shifted toward test-optional admissions policies during the pandemic. These state level leaders' collaboration with stakeholders to implement policies demonstrates a strategic response to crisis-driven legislation. This policy was developed to address disparities and provide greater opportunities for students who did not have access to resources (Belasco, 2015; Carnevale, 2019; Syverson et al., 2018).

This collaboration illustrates how adaptive leadership and interorganizational communication are critical during systemic disruptions. The legislative context adds an important layer to understanding how higher education leaders balanced institutional autonomy with state and federal mandates during the crisis.

Social Context

Leaders experienced high levels of stress resulting in resignations and shifting roles during the pandemic. Leaders were tasked with steering their organizations through the crisis, while also grappling with heightened social and ethical responsibilities, including balancing productivity with employee well-being (Johnston, 2021; Maslow, 1943).

Leaders had to focus on human needs (Maslow, 1943) as they adapted to the loss of physical workspace and the psychological (Bridges & Bridges, 2017) impact of creating a sense of belonging (Maslow, 1943) virtually. Embracing resilience and adaptability (Eger, 2017; Frankl, 1946), they navigated work-life balance amidst homeschooling, grief, letting go of old practices (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969), and economic uncertainties. The emotional toll of this transition was significant, with individuals experiencing various stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Many leaders recognized the importance of supporting their teams' emotional well-being, prioritizing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and emphasizing connection; leaders ensured security and community, demonstrating the critical role of addressing human needs for effective crisis management and organizational resilience (Eger, 2017; Frankl, 1946; Kezar et al., 2011; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Marcy et al., 2008; Maslow, 1943).

The pandemic resulted in massive workforce shifts such as employees leaving their jobs, a movement now coined the "Great Resignation." Numerous factors played a role in the "Great Resignation." Additionally, courses were moved online, in-person campus visits were cancelled, and in-person orientations were moved to virtual platforms. As organizations reassessed their roles, team members transitioned to remote work, concerns about job security intensified, and a heightened awareness of social disparities came to the forefront (Marinoni et al., 2020; Zisook et al., 2020).

Economic stressors further exposed systemic disparities affecting marginalized populations (Cullinan, 2021; Kantamneni, 2020). Burnout surged, prompting considerations of resignation or retirement for mental well-being (Greenberg et al., 2020). The closure of schools and daycare facilities added challenges for working parents in leadership roles, contributing to decisions to leave positions to address childcare and family obligations (Collins et al., 2021). The ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the workforce, with the "Great Resignation" emerging as a narrative touching almost everyone to some degree.

Economic Context

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant financial challenges for many higher education institutions. It prompted swift and decisive actions to address economic uncertainties and ensure the continuity of educational operations (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Leaders in higher education faced financial pressures, including potential declines in enrollment (Kim et al., 2020), while the shift to online learning platforms presented an investment in technology and training (Baber, 2020).

The crisis also amplified existing economic disparities (Lopez et al, 2021). Strategic leadership during this period involved navigating these financial challenges while maintaining a commitment to educational quality and accessibility (Aristovnik, 2020). Higher education leaders played a pivotal role in advocating for policy support and financial aid packages to alleviate the economic strain on students and their families, ensuring broader access to higher education (Aristovnik, 2020). Through these efforts, leaders demonstrated the connection between economic strategy and the overarching goal of supporting individual and team resilience within the academic community. It also highlighted the economic components of effective

management of higher education institutions during the pandemic (Aristovnik, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Research Study Overview

This research study uses a qualitative approach informed by single-case and cross-case research methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and Glesne's (2016) guidance on case study research. This methodological approach enhances the depth and rigor of the research, facilitating an exploration of the lived experiences of higher education leaders during crises.

The study ensures a methodological framework that provides insights into leadership dynamics within the higher education setting before, during, and after a crisis. Through this approach, the research contributes practical and theoretically grounded insights into the effective leadership strategies required in times of organizational transitions. It is framed by a theoretical lens that integrates Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002; Northouse; 2016), and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011; Northouse, 2016).

In Chapters Three through Five, I explain how the themes in this study were constructed through a step-by-step process of coding and writing analytic memos, consistent with qualitative research practice. I also avoided calling any leader or action "effective" unless there was evidence to support the claim, such as data from participants, documented outcomes, or confirmed feedback from others.

The theoretical frameworks explain how people experience and respond to change. The Bridges Transition Model (2017) focuses on the three stages of transition (i.e. Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning). Kübler-Ross (1969) describes the emotional reactions people often

feel during change, such as denial, anger, and acceptance. Maslow (1943) emphasizes that people must have their basic needs met (i.e. safety and belonging) before they grow or perform at higher levels. Together these frameworks help explain how leaders and teams think, feel, and respond during crisis.

Bridges and Bridges (2017), Kübler-Ross (1969), and Maslow's (1943) Frameworks

This research study uses a multifaceted theoretical framework to explore aspects of leadership before, during, and after a crisis. Bridges' Transition Model (2017) is used to understand the psychological adaptation processes that leaders and individuals on teams undergo as they navigate change.

The model consists of three stages: Ending (losing and letting go), Neutral Zone (a time of transition, old is gone, but the new is not fully formed), and New Beginning (renewed sense of purpose, energy, and direction). The first stage, Ending, is a phase that entails letting go of the old ways of doing things, habits, and identities.

During the first stage, individuals often experience emotions such as denial, anger, fear, and sadness associated with the Kübler-Ross Model (1969). The Neutral Zone is a phase of being in the "wilderness." This is a phase where old systems are gone, but new ones are not yet fully operational. It is often characterized by confusion, disorientation, and creativity.

Finally, the New Beginning involves embracing a new identity and engaging in new behaviors. This stage is marked by a renewed sense of purpose and understanding. Understanding these phases helps frame the responses and adaptations made by higher education leaders throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

These frameworks are explored further in later chapters. They are foundational to the conceptual framework of this study. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) complements this

framework by highlighting how leaders must balance their own needs with those of their teams, from safety and stability to growth and belonging. These models create a framework that illustrates the complex situation that leaders encounter while navigating the emotional, psychological, and logistical challenges that crises bring (Maslow, 1943).

Trait Theory

Trait Theory defines and describes leadership using personal qualities. Trait Theorists highlight what leaders are and subscribe to the narrative that leaders are born. Judge et al. (2002) examined leadership through the Big Five traits: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

Their meta-analysis found that Extroversion is the most effective trait among leaders, followed by Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience. Neuroticism and Agreeableness are the minor effective traits among leaders (Judge et al., 2002).

Interestingly, Moore (2009) suggests that overly confident (Extroverted) leaders may increase performance, but sometimes at the risk of being underprepared (lack of Conscientiousness). One criticism of Trait Theory is that it overlooks situational context. A leader may be effective in one situation, not another (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016). This aspect is particularly noteworthy for the context of this qualitative study, as it is firmly grounded in the COVID-19 pandemic, which represents a distinct and impactful situation.

DeRue et al. (2011) argues that Trait Theory is far too simplistic. A recent Harvard Business Review article supports the DeRue et al. (2011) criticism explaining that leadership cannot be measured simply on a continuum. Bailey (2016) explains, "Great can be vital, but destructive; good can be compassionate, but impotent" (Bailey, 2016; Mumford et al., 2007).

Behavior Theory

Many scholars argue that leadership research suffers from a lack of integration. DeRue et al. (2011) explores this critique in a meta-analysis that argues for a Trait and Behavior Leadership model, which found leader behaviors tend to explain more variance in effectiveness than traits alone.

Their findings revealed that Conscientiousness was the most consistent leadership trait (DeRue et al., 2011) contrasting with Judge et al.'s (2002) earlier conclusions that Extraversion was the most predictive. DeRue et al. (2011) concluded that leaders' behavior was a more impactful aspect of leadership than the traits of leaders. However, the researchers suggest that traits and behavior are interconnected; competence and interpersonal skills are critical elements of leadership (DeRue et al., 2011). This research matters, especially considering the pandemic. A Harvard Business Review article by Hougaard et al. (2020) suggests that unemployment levels, civil and political tensions, and economic instability increased during the pandemic. Hougaard et al. (2020) argues that compassion is a critical component of leadership during a crisis. Compassion is associated with Agreeableness in the Big Five and functions as both a trait and a behavior (DeRue et al, 2011; House; 1971; Judge et al., 2002; Mumford, 2008; Northouse, 2016). Hougaard et al. (2020) explains that it improves collaboration and builds trust and loyalty. Interestingly, the way leaders are perceived is linked to compassion. Employees see compassionate leaders as more dynamic and competent than leaders who do not possess this trait (Hougaard et al., 2020).

Companies around the world have grappled with the fallout from the pandemic: low employee satisfaction and high turnover. Employees who were once seen as easily replaceable by employers left their jobs at record highs. Organizations realized that they needed to value

their employees' well-being and approach employees with more care. However, Hougaard cautions that compassion is not enough. He suggests that compassion tempered with wisdom is a dynamic duo (Hougaard et al., 2020).

Beyond Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), effective crisis leadership requires understanding the deeper psychological processes that occur as individuals and teams navigate uncertainty. This introduces an important concept related to both Bridges' Transition Model (2017) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011) which touches on psychological adaptation.

Psychological Adaptation

Leaders and teams who operate under crisis encounter stress and unpredictable environments (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). The stress and unpredictable environments impact the individuals within a group differently. Everyone must psychologically adapt to their new reality, and it is crucial that leaders have the skills to guide their teams through the process of psychological adaptation (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Rubio et al., 2021). Indeed, a polar exploration team navigating extreme conditions is one of many examples of teams psychologically adapting to a situation: athletes navigating isolation during COVID-19 and spouses bereaving in old age are two other examples.

A recent study by Rubio et al. (2021) examined athletes' psychological adaptation to confinement during COVID-19. The study found that athletes who train with at least one other teammate adapt faster than their peers in isolation (Rubio et al., 2021). Rubio's findings are important because they show that community is crucial for psychological adaptation. According to Spahni et al. (2015), spousal bereavement is one of the most stressful events in life. It impacts the bereaving spouse's well-being as they adjust to their new reality (Kübler-Ross Model, 1969;

Maslow, 1943; Spahni et al., 2015). Some of the findings outlined in Spahni's research highlight patterns of psychological adaptation and variables among these patterns in terms of resources. The study found that "A successful adaptation is primarily associated with high scores in psychological resilience and extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness and low scores in neuroticism" (Spahni et al., 2015, p.466).

Change is an event that requires a psychological component to navigate (Bridges and Bridges, 2017). Therefore, psychological adaptation to change is critical. Psychological adaptation allows teams to grieve through the crisis (Kübler-Ross Model, 1969; Spahni et al., 2015). Leaders need to help the individuals on their teams internalize their experiences as they navigate difficult times (Bridges and Bridges, 2017; Brent Dempster, Personal Communication, December 6, 2021).

Integrating psychological adaptation into leadership theory emphasizes that effective crisis response extends beyond action; it requires leaders to maintain emotional stability, shared meaning, and resilience within their teams. This concept bridges Trait and Behavior Theories (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002) with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Bridges' Transition Model (2017) frameworks, highlighting how leaders can help teams move from disruption to renewal.

Contextual Placement of the Study

The contextual placement of this study is linked to the experiences of one LGU before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research study aims to explore the unique challenges that higher education leaders and teams encountered during an unparalleled global crisis. The study is framed within the broader theoretical context of Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Specifically,

Maslow's model underscores the significance of attending to fundamental human needs, a concept that aligns with Hougaard et al.'s (2020) advocacy for compassion in leadership. This aspect of leadership proved to be especially important during the pandemic, as it not only exposed, but also exacerbated disparities and inequities among marginalized groups (Cullinan, 2021; Kantamneni, 2020). The study seeks to analyze how these theoretical frameworks can guide and improve leadership responses in times of crisis, emphasizing the necessity for addressing basic needs and emotional support to foster a resilient environment (Kübler-Ross Model, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

This study delimits its scope in several ways. First, it centers on single-case studies of the experiences of each leader interviewed for the study before, during, and after the pandemic within one university. It creates cross-case analysis of these single cases to identify common themes. Given the nature of this research, findings are not intended to be generalizable to leadership in all higher education institutions. However, the in-depth interviews and thematic analyses can provide deeper insight into how leaders view their work in a time of crisis. Second, my dual role as a doctoral student and university staff member introduces potential biases, with personal experience shaping interpretations. Third, the study is bound by the constraints relating to the timing of the pandemic. It should be noted that leadership dynamics during crises may differ from more stable periods. While this study examines leadership before, during, and after the pandemic, it is not a comprehensive overview. Furthermore, the qualitative methodology, employing in-depth interviews, confines the study to subjective insights, limiting the ability to draw broad statistical generalizations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The intentional focus on the pandemic and crises at one large western institution may restrict the transferability of findings to diverse organizational contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study acknowledges certain limitations and assumptions, which shape its research boundaries. The study focuses on one university, a decision made based on the evolution of the project, initially designed as a qualitative class project and later transitioned into a dissertation research study in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Another limitation stems from my dual role as a doctoral student and university staff member, which may introduce bias in the interpretation of collected data (Tracy, 2010). A key assumption of this study is that participants engaging in qualitative interviews provided accurate and honest responses, relying on their self-reported experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It is important to note that the study is framed by the COVID-19 pandemic, so leadership dynamics during crises may evolve differently in non-pandemic situations (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study restricts the potential for broad statistical generalizations, emphasizing reliance on in-depth interviews for nuanced insights rather than quantitative measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the COVID-19 crisis, higher education leaders faced unprecedented challenges, requiring psychological adaptation and decisive action to guide their institutions through turbulent times. Chapter One outlined the historical, economic, legislative, social, and contextual components of higher education leadership before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing parallels with the 1918 Spanish flu (Barry, 2004; Fosmoe, 2020).

Chapter Two reviews the literature that grounds this research study's theoretical framework. The chapter examines the transition process that occurs in response to a crisis using Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and analyzes leadership during crises through Trait and Behavior Theories (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016). A large body of literature addresses leaders and teams operating under extreme conditions. However, comparative literature about higher education leaders and teams before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic is scant.

While many studies examine crisis leadership broadly, this research emphasizes that the COVID-19 pandemic was a distinct type of crisis for higher education. It was not political, environmental, or organizational in origin. It was a natural, global, and enduring disruption. This distinction strengthens the contribution of this study to the field of crisis leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unique factors that differentiated it from other crises. Mandated social distancing led to isolation that disrupted collaboration and team cohesion, while shortages of resources and heightened health-related anxiety impacted psychological safety (Maslow, 1943). The crisis struck mid-semester, conflicting with immovable admissions and academic calendars. It unfolded with unprecedented speed yet persisted across years, requiring leaders to

sustain crisis management far beyond typical timelines. Unlike crises with identifiable causes, the pandemic lacked a clear source of blame, creating ambiguity and a shared sense of vulnerability across all organizational levels. These distinct elements shaped how leaders navigated the transition resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, making psychological adaptation central to leadership responses.

Land-Grant Initiative Amidst Turmoil: Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln – the 16th President of the United States – demonstrated leadership during one of the most uncertain times in American history – the Civil War. His commitment to preserving the Union and his ability to handle significant political, social, and military challenges highlight his leadership capacity (Donald, 1995). Lincoln believed in the importance of access to education. He signed the Morrill Act in 1862, expanding higher education in America by allocating federal land to states to fund the creation of Land-Grant Universities (Donald, 1995; Geiger, 2013). The goal of this initiative was to make education accessible to the broader population. Lincoln’s vision to unify a country in crisis while working towards long-term societal improvement through education demonstrates intentional leadership (Donald, 1995). This study ties in elements from Lincoln’s focus on stability and a long-term mission, particularly through the lens of psychological adaptation frameworks.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education leaders encountered a crisis that impacted university operations. Many balanced the immediate crisis with executing long-term strategic planning initiatives, such as test-optional practices that had been under discussion for years to increase access to education (Belasco et al., 2015; Burton & Ramist, 2001; Carnevale et al., 2019; Hiss & Franks, 2014). They addressed concerns and communicated with staff and students, holding virtual check-ins amidst the shift to online learning while also attending to

long-term goals. This echoed Lincoln's public addresses that helped preserve the Union and his long-term land-grant initiative (Donald, 1995). Just as Lincoln's leadership learned to navigate the tumultuous period of the Civil War, higher education leaders had to learn to navigate multiple challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Underutilized frameworks such as Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) offer insights into managing the human aspects (i.e. psychological adaptation, emotional journey, and individuals' needs) of organizational transitions during crisis (Leybourne, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of the theoretical framework used for this study is constructed on Bridges' Transition Model (2017), which serves as a cornerstone for examining how leaders navigate crises and adapt to organizational change, with an emphasis on the process of psychological adaptation (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). This model distinguishes change from transition: change is an external event or circumstance while transition is the internal psychological process through which individuals come to terms with that change. Bridges' Transition Model (2017) suggests that successful leadership during times of disruption depends on a leader's ability to guide both themselves and individuals on teams through this internal process. The model unfolds across three phases (i.e. Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning). The first phase, Ending, represents the recognition that old identities, structures, or processes can no longer be sustained. In this phase, individuals experience resistance, denial, or grief as they detach from familiar norms and ways of working. For leaders, this step requires both acknowledging loss and facilitating closure for the individuals on their team members. Key components include communicating transparently, validating emotions, and creating space for conversations that process the Ending (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969).

The second phase, the Neutral Zone, is characterized by disorientation and decreased productivity as the old systems are dissolved and new patterns not yet established. This phase is a time of discomfort yet crucial for innovation. It requires leaders to demonstrate behavioral adaptability, model patience, and encourage experimentation while maintaining psychological safety during times of confusion and frustration (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

The final phase, the New Beginning, occurs when individuals or organizations establish renewed purpose, clarity, and emerging structures. This stage involves forming a new identity, internalizing new values, and re-energizing around shared meaning (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Frankl, 1946). Leaders who thrive during this phase communicate a clear vision and establish new norms. The progression from Endings through the Neutral Zone to New Beginnings highlights the importance of decision-making and emotional intelligence (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Within this study, all analytic themes are constructed from participants' perspectives of their lived experiences and aligned with these transition phases. Overall, Bridges' Transition Model (2017) offers a useful way to understand how leaders and teams navigate the psychological side of change. Bridges' Transition Model (2017) defines a transition not simply as a change but as a three-phase process that individuals go through when they experience change. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, for many, was an instant change from in-person to virtual experiences. However, transition revolves around the psychological adjustments and reorientations people must make to adapt to new situations. Unlike change, which can happen quickly and is often external such as moving to a new city, starting a new job, or ending a

relationship, transitions are internal and take time as individuals psychologically and emotionally re-align themselves with their new reality (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Importance of Psychological Adaptation

Psychological adaptation sits at the center of this study's focus. As individuals face a changing landscape of personal and professional challenges, the ability to adapt psychologically is essential for maintaining well-being and achieving growth (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Maslow, 1943; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Leybourne, 2016). Psychological adaptation enables individuals to process and accept changes, whether they are expected or sudden, minimizing the negative impact of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). By successfully navigating the emotional and cognitive aspects of the Neutral Zone, individuals can transform potential obstacles into opportunities for development, enhancing resilience, and leading to a more productive New Beginning (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Adaptation moves beyond survival toward learning and growth. Psychological adaptation goes beyond coping; it leverages change as a catalyst for personal evolution and success (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Coping with change at the individual level involves engaging with the transition process, which is distinct from situational changes (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969) and involves an internalized emotional process (Leybourne, 2016). The three phases of Bridges' Transition Model (2017) (i.e. Endings, Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings) are important phases for leaders to learn to navigate.

In this study, psychological adaptation in this study is defined as a constructive process in which individuals think about what happened (reflect), make sense of their experiences (sense-making), and find new meaning (meaning-making) in those experiences (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Eger, 2017; Frankl, 1963). Psychological adaptation goes beyond coping; it leverages

change as a catalyst for processing an individual's interior world during the transition. Change is something that happens externally while transition is the internal process.

This study clarifies how participants were defined as leaders. Participants were identified as leaders based on hierarchy and their consistent reference by peers and colleagues as individuals who exercised influence, strategy, and support during the pandemic. While formal titles guided recruitment, leadership identity was constructed through participants' narratives and self-descriptions, which revealed behavior and psychological indicators of leadership. Additionally, participants occasionally referenced colleagues' leadership actions. These references were not directly solicited but occurred organically during the interviews.

Ending

The phase of Ending, Losing, and Letting Go is the first process of transition. It is similar to autumn, where the leaves that once flourished detach and fall, making room for new growth. This stage begins with the acknowledgement of an ending (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969). Like the leaves that change color, individuals may experience a spectrum of emotions from denial and resistance to sadness and disorientation. This phase is not linear but rather a series of complex processes of letting go of the old. As autumn eventually leads to a barren winter, this phase requires individuals to let go of old identities and attachments, preparing the ground for renewal. Managing this phase effectively involves acceptance and acknowledgement of the new reality. Seeking support and validation provides the individual with stability (Maslow, 1943). Through this process individuals can navigate the Endings, setting the stage for the Neutral Zone (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Leybourne, 2016). In this study, employees at the LGU had to quickly understand, acknowledge, and accept the effects of the pandemic on their lives and their work as work-life balance shifted overnight. With the ground shifting

beneath them, many looked to leadership for stability (Maslow, 1943). The Ending is marked by the onset of COVID-19 during the spring 2020 semester.

Neutral Zone

The Neutral Zone, in the process of transition, serves as the winter, which is a time of introspection and dormancy while growth occurs beneath the surface. The Neutral Zone is critical for growth. When conditions are right, the plant produces shoots that can grow above ground. While many may want to rush the time in the Neutral Zone, it is a critical phase, often characterized by a decrease in visible productivity and motivation. However, this phase carries great potential for processing the crisis, psychologically adapting, and preparing for a New Beginning. Individuals struggle with what was and what will be during this phase (Bridges, & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Leybourne, 2016). The Neutral Zone offers significant opportunities for creativity and renewal, where self-reflection and reevaluation become the tools for carrying out New Beginnings. Experimentation with new roles during this time acts like the first shoots of a plant breaking through winter's frost. Navigating this phase successfully involves establishing routines that provide structure amid the uncertainty (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969). Setting short-term goals is one of many action steps that leaders and individuals on a team can take during this phase (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). This period, while challenging, is crucial for laying the groundwork for the transformation that follows. The Neutral Zone is the timeframe between the onset of COVID during the spring 2020 semester and the CDC's declaration of the pandemic ending during the fall 2022 semester.

New Beginning

The New Beginning phase is a period marked by the blossoming of a new identity where the seeds of change planted in earlier phases start to sprout, a process that must be nurtured

through the adoption of new behaviors (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Individuals cultivate these new aspects, integrate them, build competence and confidence in new roles, and establish relationships that reflect transformed identities. This phase is not just about reaching a new destination but also sustaining the momentum of change through continuous reinforcement and celebration of each milestone achieved (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). It encourages a mindset of continuous learning and adaptation. Individuals recognize that tapping into resilience is key, as they move into a new chapter filled with renewed possibility and purpose. As with any model, though, there is always room for criticism. While these frameworks integrate various models of leadership during crises, some could argue that they oversimplify human behaviors and cultural variations. It is important to complement these frameworks with leadership Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011; Northouse; 2016). The New Beginning is the timeframe after the declaration of the pandemic ending.

Supporting theories such as the Kübler-Ross Model (1969) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) further strengthen the framework by addressing the dynamic nature of change, crisis, emotions, and psychological adaptation, emphasizing the importance of addressing individuals' needs (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Leybourne, 2016; Maslow, 1943). One of the many challenges that leaders face in addressing crisis situations is attending to the emotional and behavior aspects of individuals on teams (Leybourne, 2016). While the challenges of organizational change have been well documented (Couch & French, 1948; Leybourne, 2016), additional frameworks have been developed to further illuminate the topic. These more recent frameworks are underutilized (Leybourne, 2016).

One such framework is the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), known as the Five Stages of Grief. It outlines the emotional stages that individuals typically experience when confronted with

significant loss or trauma (Kübler-Ross, 1969). During a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is helpful if leaders recognize and navigate these states within themselves and among their teams. The five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance highlight the emotional phases that individuals may experience (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Effective leaders acknowledge and validate these emotions (Bridges & Bridges, 2017), creating a supportive environment for their teams to express, process, and cope with stress (Leybourne, 2016). By understanding the stages of grief, leaders can anticipate and address emotional needs, providing empathy, communication, and resources to support their team members through the healing process (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Leybourne, 2016).

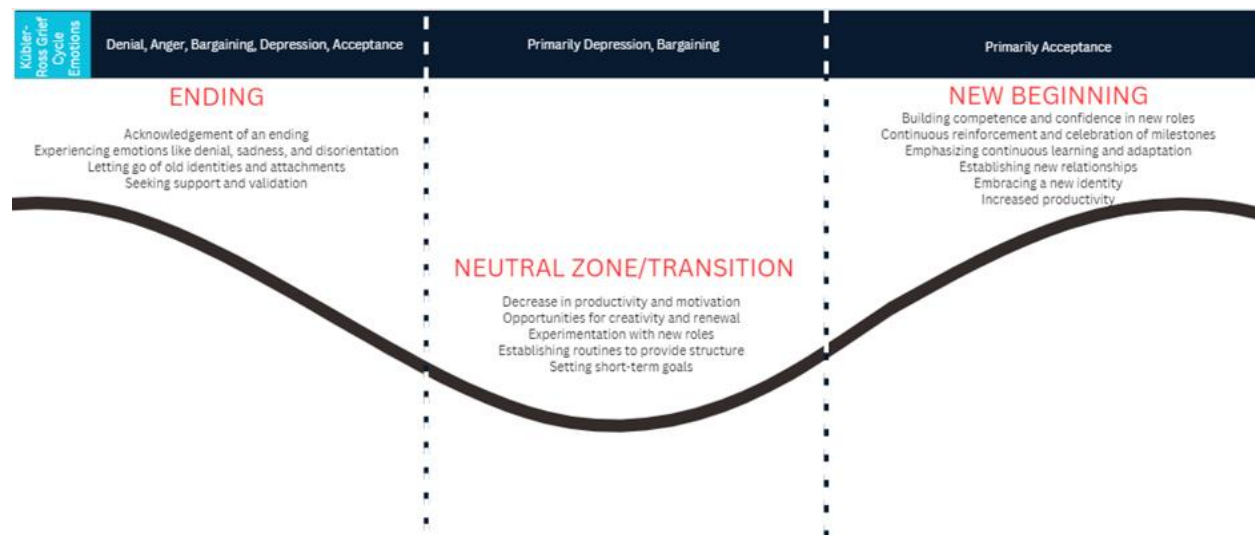


Figure 4. Bridges' Transition Model. Adapted from Bridges and Bridges (2017).

Similar to the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) has stages. Maslow's five-tier model of human needs begins with physiological needs and ends with self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders must consider how to address these needs to effectively guide their teams. At the base, physiological needs such as access to necessities like food, shelter, and safety become paramount during times

of crisis (Leybourne, 2016; Maslow; 1943). It is helpful if leaders take active steps to attend to their well-being and the safety of their team members, providing resources and support as needed, particularly during the Neutral Zone of Bridges' Transition Model (2017). Moving up the hierarchy, individuals need to feel a sense of security, belonging, and esteem. These needs, when met, foster a sense of community and support (Maslow, 1943). Finally, leaders can encourage self-actualization by providing opportunities for growth, innovation, and meaningful contribution, even in challenging circumstances which align with the New Beginning phase of Bridges' Transition Model (2017). By understanding and addressing these needs, leaders can better support their teams and navigate crises with resilience and cohesion (Maslow, 1943).



Figure 5. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model (1943). Adapted from Maslow (1943) and Steinbach Leadership Training (2022).

The overlap between Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) creates a dynamic picture for leaders to use as they navigate crises and support individuals on their teams throughout the process. Bridges' Transition Model (2017) emphasizes the phases of Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning, mirroring the emotional phases in the Kübler-Ross Model (1969). These models highlight the

importance of acknowledging and navigating emotional responses to change (Leybourne, 2016), while Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a supporting lens for understanding the essential human needs: physiological needs, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization that must be addressed to support individuals through transitions (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Maslow, 1943). By recognizing these overlaps, leaders can better guide their teams through challenging times (Leybourne, 2016). In the face of COVID-19, leaders and individuals on teams were confronted with addressing challenges that required new problem-solving approaches. As psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Frankl (1946) noted, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." This perspective became essential for leaders during the pandemic, as they had to engage in new strategic planning efforts, embrace digital transformation, and cultivate resilience with their teams to navigate the crisis effectively (Eger, 2017). Given that leadership effectiveness is difficult to define objectively, this study avoids using the term "effective" to describe leaders' traits and behaviors unless supported by participants' direct evidence, such as statements of impact or observable outcomes.

Leadership Paradigms

Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011) provide a framework to examine the characteristics and actions of leaders that can either facilitate or hinder the process of change. The coupling of understanding psychological adaptation and traits and behaviors is critical for understanding leadership before, during, and after a crisis. This focus not only helps predict leadership success and effectiveness in stable conditions but also equips organizations with insights necessary for navigating tumultuous times effectively. It emphasizes the importance of leadership qualities in managing both expected and unexpected challenges.

Trait Theory

Trait Theory attempts to define and describe leadership using personal qualities. Trait Theorists subscribe to the narrative that leaders are born (Allport, 1937; Carlyle, 1907; Cattell, 1943, Eysenck, 1967; Judge et al., 2002; Mumford et al., 2007). Trait Theory serves as a tool for psychological assessment and for predicting occupational success and psychological well-being (Goldberg, 1993).

Many researchers examine leadership through the Big Five traits: Extroversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and (low) Neuroticism (OCEAN). According to Judge et al. (2002), Extraversion is characterized by positive emotions and a tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others. Openness to experience encompasses the dimensions of a personality that are imaginative and insightful. Conscientiousness involves a high level of self-discipline and a tendency to be goal-oriented. Agreeableness indicates a person who is altruistic, and considerate. Low Neuroticism is associated with an individual who is emotionally stable and likely to interpret situations in a non-threatening manner (Judge et al., 2002). The meta-analysis found that Extroversion is the most effective trait among leaders. An article by Moore (2021) suggests that overly Extroverted leaders may increase performance, but sometimes at the risk of being underprepared (lack of Conscientiousness). Low Neuroticism and Agreeableness are less predictive of effective leadership overall. However, Agreeableness is an important trait for leaders in student settings (Judge et al., 2002). Additionally, Judge et al., (2002) found that Agreeableness may not be highly associated with leadership. This is because people tend not to see agreeable people as leaders. However, agreeable leaders are effective, and the correlation increases when examined through an effectiveness lens. So, Agreeableness does matter, but the Agreeableness trait's impact is cloaked based on how the question is asked. People do not see

agreeable people as leaders, but agreeable people are more effective (Judge et al., 2002; Mumford et al., 2007). The following data table provides a detailed breakdown of the key metrics and outcomes from the study by Judge et al., (2002).

Table 2

The Relationship Between the Big Five Personality Traits and Leadership

Trait	Average					80% CV		95% CI	
	<i>K</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>R</i>	ρ	<i>SD</i> ρ	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Neuroticism	48	8,025	-.17	-.24	.18	-.47	-.01	-.30	-.18
Extraversion	60	11,705	.22	.31	.17	.09	.53	.26	.36
Openness	37	7,221	.16	.24	.11	.09	.38	.19	.28
Agreeableness	42	9,801	.06	.08	.17	-.14	.29	.02	.13
Conscientiousness	35	7,510	.20	.28	.17	.06	.51	.22	.34

One criticism of Trait Theory is that it does not consider situations. This is an especially important critique given that this research study is examining leadership through the lens of a specific crisis like COVID-19. A leader may be effective in one situation, not another (DeRue et al., 2011; Mumford et al., 2007; Northouse, 2016). While Trait Theory is the most widespread and well-researched leadership approach, it fails to consider that the way a leader behaves in one situation may vary from another situation. DeRue et al. (2011) argues that Trait Theory is far too simplistic; a leader's effectiveness may not be transferable from one situation to the next. Many scholars and practitioners agree that leadership is more complex than a simple list of traits.

Behavior Theory

Many researchers argue that leadership research suffers from a lack of integration. DeRue et al. (2011) explores this critique in a meta-analysis. It argues for a Trait-Behavior leadership model, finding that Conscientiousness is the most consistent trait among leaders (DeRue et al.,

2011). This is important because it pushes back on the findings from the meta-analysis by Judge et al., (2002) that found that Extroversion was the most consistent trait. DeRue et al., (2011) concluded that leaders' behavior was a more impactful aspect of leadership than the traits of leaders. However, the meta-analysis suggests that traits and behavior are interconnected; competence and interpersonal skills are critical elements of leadership (DeRue et al., 2011).

This research matters, especially in light of the pandemic. Hougaard et al. (2020) argues that compassion is a component of leadership during crisis. Compassion is associated with the Agreeableness trait highlighted in the Big Five and is a trait and behavior. Hougaard et al. (2020) explains that it improves collaboration, builds trust, and enhances loyalty. Interestingly, the way leaders are perceived is linked to compassion. Employees see compassionate leaders as more dynamic and competent than leaders who do not possess this trait (Hougaard et al., 2020).

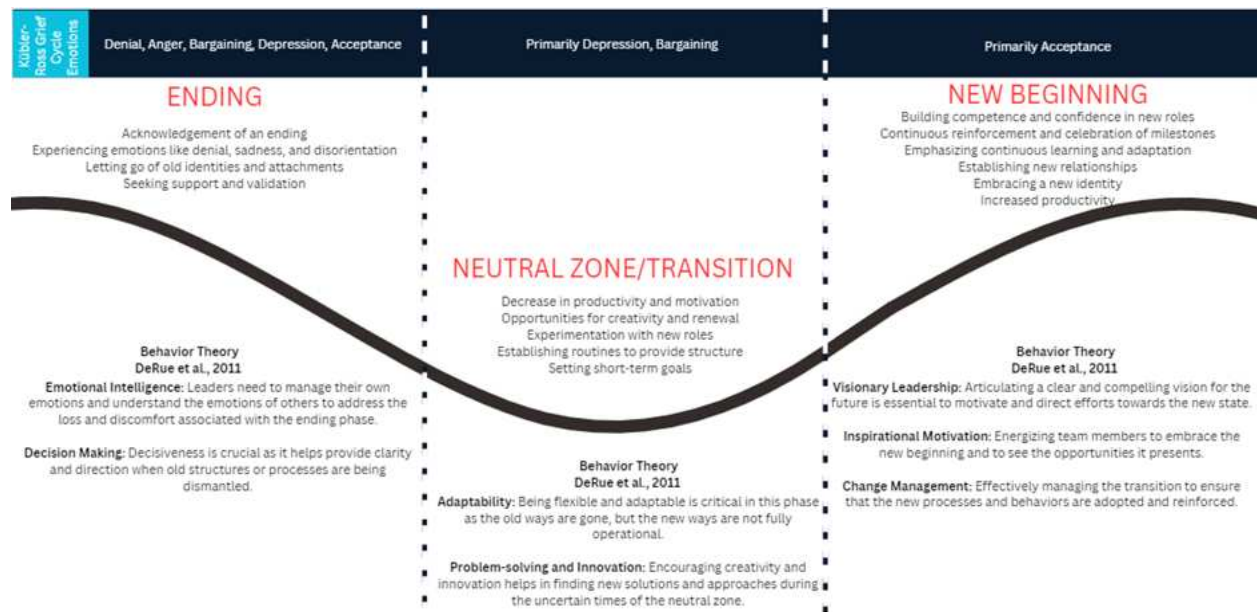


Figure 6. Integrative Framework: Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1943), and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011). Adapted from Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and DeRue et al. (2011).

Behavior vs. Trait Theory

Trait Theory dominated leadership until Stogdill began research at Ohio State University, leading to Behavior Theory (Stogdill, 1948). Katz and Kahn (1951) of the University of Michigan began similar Behavior Trait studies. Behavior Theory expanded scholars' understanding of leadership and created space for what leaders do in situations and how leaders' behavior influences followers (Northouse, 2016). The meta-analysis conducted by Derue et al., (2011) explores several leadership traits. It highlights leader effectiveness, group performance, follower job satisfaction, and follower satisfaction with the leader.

DeRue et al., (2011) highlights several leadership traits in relation to leader effectiveness, group performance, follower job satisfaction, and satisfaction with the leader. It found that Gender and Agreeableness have minimal impact on leader effectiveness. In contrast, Intelligence, Openness to Experience, and Emotional Stability are identified as moderate indicators. Conscientiousness and Extraversion are significant factors. DeRue et al., (2011) found that group performance is significantly influenced by Agreeableness. Agreeableness is an important aspect to employee satisfaction with the leader. Overall, Conscientiousness is the most important trait for group performance, indicating that leaders who pay attention to details and follow through on commitments tend to drive better performance (DeRue et al., 2011).

Table 3

Importance of Leader Traits in Predicting Leadership Effectiveness Outcomes. Adapted from DeRue et al. (2011).

Trait	Leader effectiveness		Group performance		Follower job satisfaction		Satisfaction with leader	
	+/-	% R^2	+/-	% R^2	+/-	% R^2	+/-	% R^2
Gender	-	1.4			-	13.6	Null	0.4
Intelligence	+	8.2	+	1.5				
Emotional Stability	+	14.3	-	7.6	+	7.2	+	7.4
Agreeableness	+	.9	+	22.0	+	1.8	+	81.0
Conscientiousness	+	27.0	+	61.5	-	50.6	-	9.4
Extraversion	+	35.1	Null	.30	+	25.9	+	0.6
Openness to Experience	+	13.2	+	7.1	Null	1.0	+	1.2
Total R^2		.22		.14		.02		.06

DeRue et al., (2011) demonstrated that leaders' behaviors significantly predict leadership effectiveness, highlighting that Behavior Theory has a greater impact on leadership effectiveness than Trait Theory. Consequently, this paper will lean into Behavior Theory. While Behavior Theory will be the primary leadership framework for this research study, there are several other noteworthy leadership styles.

Distinctive Features of Pandemic Leadership

This section articulates how the pandemic required different leadership approaches than typical crises. Most crises are bounded by time. The COVID-19 pandemic required leaders to sustain crisis management over an extended period while meeting institutional deadlines and addressing staff well-being. The "normal" crisis response cycle never fully concluded, blurring lines between operational management and emotional supports.

Higher education leaders navigated complex overlapping demands. Leaders had to ensure that the admissions process was running smoothly while maintaining morale through isolation, addressing basic human needs (Maslow, 1943), and navigating employees retiring or resigning

(Rosalsky, 2021). They supported teams with a variety of challenges ranging from health concerns to technology. These layers differentiated pandemic leadership from other crisis situations.

The Case of Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington's story is described in his biography, *Up From Slavery* (1901). His journey into leadership was shaped by foundational experiences in his early years. He became known as a resilient, adaptable, and purpose-driven leader. These qualities align with the traits and behaviors explored in this study. He was born into slavery, experienced poverty, and had limited access to education after emancipation. These early years instilled in him a respect for hard work and self-discipline. One core memory he shares early in the biography is a moment when his older brother gave him a burlap sack shirt, usually painful to wear at first, that he had already broken in for Booker, sparing him the discomfort. He highlights examples throughout the initial chapters of his brother and mentors who helped him along his way. While his early years were difficult, the experiences shaped him as a person and future leader. Years later when he traveled to attend Hampton Institute, he arrived with almost no money and was initially turned away. When given a task to clean a room, he shared that he did the smallest tasks, even cleaning a room, with the greatest detail and thoroughness. This moment reflected one of his many traits: the ability to do excellent work with limited resources. It also paved the way for him to fund his education. Later, he went on to establish Tuskegee Institute. He demonstrated that he could support teams during uncertainty (i.e. financial hardship, hostile racial climate, uncertainty in student enrollment, etc.) and build a highly respected university (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016). His story serves as an example of transformational leadership.

Team Leadership

Team leadership is like being the conductor of an orchestra. The conductor guides each musician to play their part in harmony, creating beautiful music together. However, if the conductor is too controlling or fails to understand the unique talents of each musician, the performance can become rigid and lose its emotional depth. Team leadership emphasizes how a leader influences and directs team dynamics toward collective goals (Hackman, 2002; Wageman, 2001). It explores how effective team leadership involves not only setting clear goals, but also fostering an environment that promotes collaboration and innovation among team members. Edmonson (2012) highlights the importance of psychological safety in team settings (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Edmonson, 2012; Leybourne, 2016; Maslow, 1943), where leaders create a culture that encourages open communication and risk-taking without fear of negative repercussions. Team leadership is most effective when leaders balance creating a safe work environment with task management (Ceri-Booms et al., 2017). Leaders can advance team performance by promoting both internal and external communication, allowing members to share insights and strategies. However, this team-focused approach requires careful structuring to prevent inefficiencies (Ceri-Booms et al., 2017; Northouse, 2016). While the team-focused leadership approach has received positive reviews for increasing communication and resource-sharing, it is critiqued for over-emphasizing collaboration at the expense of personal accountability (Mathieu et al., 2008).

Transformational Leadership

The Transformational leadership approach is like gardening. The leader nurtures each plant, providing the right amount of water, sunlight, and nutrients to encourage growth. However, just as a gardener may struggle if they overlook the specific needs of different plants

or if the environment changes unpredictably, a transformational leader may falter if they cannot adapt their approach to the evolving needs of their team or organization. Transformational leadership is a model that emphasizes inspiring and motivating employees to exceed their own expectations and capabilities, fostering both individual and organizational growth. Introduced by Burns (1978) and supported by Bass (1985), this leadership style is characterized by four key components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Wang et al. (2011) conducted a 25-year meta-analysis highlighting that this approach to leadership enhances work performance and creativity in team tasks. However, critics argue that this approach is highly idealistic, often overlooking practical constraints, and that effectiveness diminishes in highly structured, routine-oriented environments where innovation and flexibility are less valued (Van Knippenberg et al., 2013).

Directive Leadership

Directive leadership sometimes improves outputs, but this approach can result in defective decisions when team members fear speaking up (Cruz et. al., 1999). In 1994, the Storm King Mountain Fire near Glenwood Springs, Colorado, initially a small blaze that locals believed could have been extinguished with a shovel, escalated into a deadly inferno due to a combination of unpredictable fire behavior and unclear management directives (Roberto et al., 2003). The situation worsened as the fire crews, adhering to a directive leadership style, hesitated to voice concerns or deviate from orders, even when personal reservations existed. This reluctance to speak up, stemming from a fear of conflict and a lack of open communication, was critical. For instance, firefighters Erickson and Archuleta followed the chief's risky orders without expressing their apprehensions, reflecting a broader issue where the crew's "can-do" attitude and rigid adherence to protocols hindered adaptive decision-making and led to tragic outcomes. The

directive approach compounded the crew's challenges, as they received conflicting commands and lacked a cohesive response strategy when the fire's rapid spread demanded immediate and decisive action (Roberto et al., 2003). This tragic event highlights the changes of directive leadership in crisis situations where open dialogue and flexibility are crucial.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is like steering a ship through changing seas. The captain must constantly adjust the sails and course in response to shifting winds and currents, harnessing these changes to propel the ship forward. However, this constant need for adaptation can be exhausting for the crew and if not managed well, it may lead to confusion or loss of direction. One such leader is the Antarctic explorer, Ernest Shackleton. His team experienced tremendous hardship when their vessel, the *Endurance*, became locked in by ice. The purpose of the mission shifted from exploration to survival. Consider Shackleton's leadership. His initial purpose led the crew to disaster; the *Endurance* became locked by ice under harsh weather conditions (Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson, 2015; Lansing, 2014). However, Shackleton defined a new purpose and led the crew successfully to safety. Shackleton's adept problem-solving and ability to guide teams through challenges is an example of Adaptive Leadership, which emphasizes the adaptability of followers in the face of complex challenges (Northouse, 2016). This leadership style pushes back on static leadership approaches like Trait Theory, by acknowledging the need for flexibility and innovation in leadership. However, this approach requires skilled leaders, and critics note that it may overly emphasize change, potentially neglecting the benefits of stability and consistency which are so crucial for long-term success and predictability in environments (Northouse, 2016).

Servant Leadership

In Morgan's, *Images of Organization*, he describes the culture created by servant leaders in terms of a metaphor. Cultivation is the process of developing land (Morgan, 2018). An organization's culture often manifests through environmental values and daily rituals. This phenomenon is rooted in organizational structures (Morgan, 2018). Morgan suggests that organizational culture is similar to the Japanese rice fields. The Japanese plant their rice fields using a communal approach of sharing resources. All the rice field workers know that their actions impact the entire community. Water is shared, and the fieldwork requires collaborative teamwork (Morgan, 2018). Morgan further explains that this "rice culture" transferred to the Japanese factories after World War II and is one of the reasons the Japanese are considered experts in creating and sustaining a collaborative and productive work environment. They are servant leaders. Servant leaders focus on the needs of their teams and place themselves in the role of a servant. The paradox of being a servant leader is that these leaders are also influencers. They prioritize their followers. They advocate for the needs of the people they serve and seek collaboration and consensus on decision-making policies (Northouse, 2016).

Synthesis of Frameworks Guiding the Research Study

This integrated theoretical framework was constructed through the synthesis of these models, rather than being inductively constructed from the data. Each model contributes unique insights. Bridges' Transition Model (2017) provides a process framework, the Kübler-Ross Model (1969) highlights emotional phases, Maslow (1943) emphasizes human needs, and Trait and Behavior Theories (DeRue et al, 2011; Judge et al., 2002) explain leadership dispositions and actions within crisis situations.

It is essential to integrate these leadership styles and insights within the broader theoretical framework. This synthesis allows for a more cohesive understanding of how different leadership approaches interact with theoretical concepts to shape organizations. This theoretical framework synthesis forms a comprehensive approach to understanding leadership during transformative times. These frameworks include Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011) and Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002). Together, they provide a multi-dimensional perspective on navigating organizational and individual changes during a crisis. This integrated approach allows for an exploration of how leaders can effectively support and guide their teams through the complexities of transitional periods. The integration of these models provides a framework for this research study.

Bridges' Transition Model (2017) serves as a foundational framework with its three phases: Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning. Each phase requires specific leadership behaviors to manage the emotional and logistical shifts that accompany transitions. Figure 7 emphasizes the necessity for leaders to facilitate Endings positively, guide their teams through the uncertainties of the Neutral Zone, and foster a sense of renewal and acceptance in the New Beginning. Additionally, Bridges' Transition Model (2017) highlights the importance of psychological adaptation (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

The Kübler-Ross Model (1969) complements Bridges' Transition Model (2017) by offering insights into the emotional journey that leaders and individuals on teams may experience during a crisis. Originally developed to describe the stages of grief associated with death and dying, this model has been applied to various types of loss, including organizational changes during a crisis. The stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance

provide a framework for understanding the emotional responses that leaders and individuals on teams must navigate, both in themselves and their teams, to maintain coherence and functionality (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

The literature on leadership traits and behaviors during crises, particularly insights from DeRue et al. (2011), Hougaard et al. (2020), and Northouse (2016) identifies essential behaviors that leaders should exhibit to effectively manage teams through turbulent times. DeRue et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of adaptive leadership, which involves flexibility, decisive action, and the ability to communicate clearly and empathetically. These behaviors are crucial in ensuring teams feel supported and remain focused amidst uncertainty. Hougaard et al. (2020) further highlights the role of compassion in leadership, arguing that compassionate leadership enhances team cohesion and resilience. This aligns with the need for leaders to address the emotional dimensions highlighted by the Kübler-Ross Model (1969) and the transitional phases described by Bridges' Transition Model (2017).

By synthesizing these frameworks, the study seeks to identify leadership behaviors that are critical during crises. These behaviors include the capacity for leaders to manage their own emotions effectively and those of individuals on their team (Kübler-Ross, 1969), the ability to navigate through transitions (Bridges & Bridges, 2017), and the adaptability and empathetic communication necessary to guide teams through crises (DeRue et al., 2011; Hougaard, 2020). Collectively, these frameworks provide a multi-dimensional understanding of leadership during crisis, emphasizing the interplay between navigating crises, addressing emotional needs, and enacting behaviors that support and advance organizational resilience and adaptation. This synthesis informs the theoretical framework of this research study and guides the investigation into how leaders can effectively support their teams during periods of significant disruption. It

establishes a foundation for exploring the specific traits and strategies that enhance leadership efficacy under pressure. This enriched perspective aids in pinpointing the critical elements that differentiate effective leadership during challenging times. Moreover, it underscores the importance of adaptive leadership practices that not only respond to immediate challenges but also foster long-term sustainability and growth within organizations (Bridges W., & Bridges, 2017; Northouse, 2016). Figure 7 combines the chapter’s frameworks and applies them to the Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning phases.

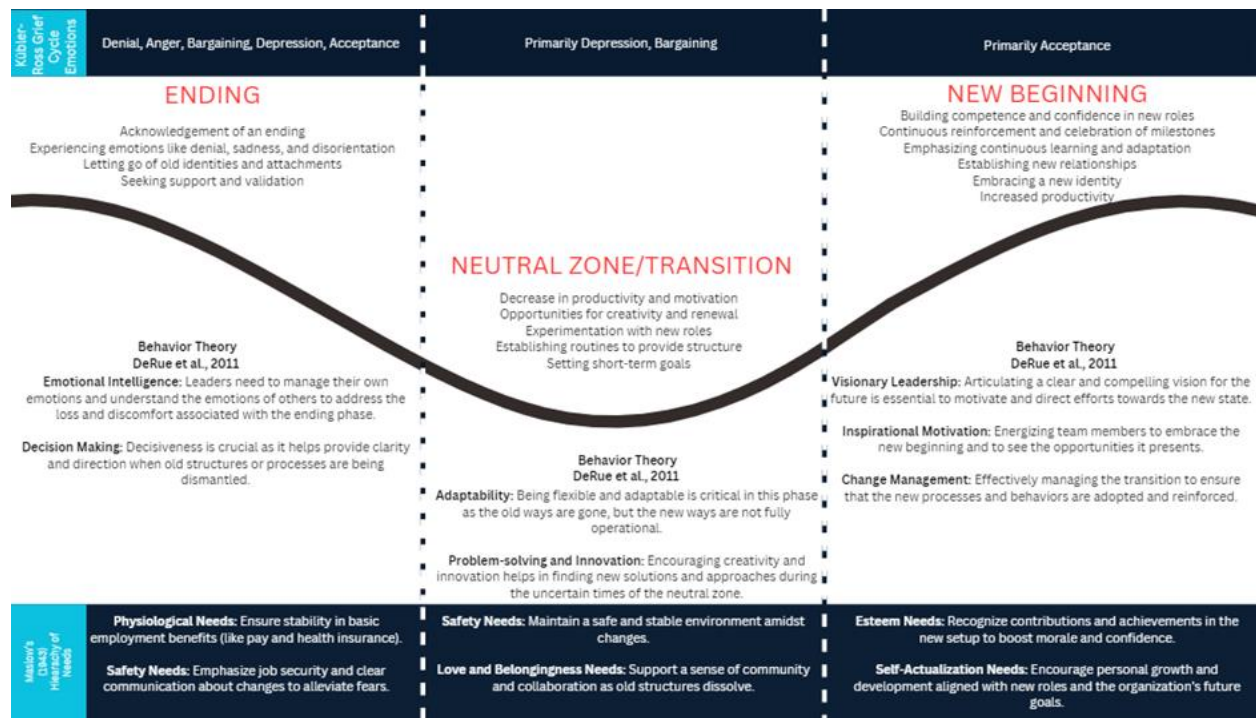


Figure 7. Crisis Leadership: Combining Bridges’ Transition Model (2017), DeRue et al., (2011), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Adapted from Bridges’ Transition Model (2017), DeRue et al., (2011), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

Figure 7 combines each component of this theoretical framework; integrating Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011) to analyze leadership before and during crises. The study maps out the phases of a crisis based on Bridges' Transition

Model (2017) of Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning, aligning them with specific leadership behaviors and psychological needs. Figure 6 maps out the Ending phase. It shows the importance of acknowledging the Ending, where leaders and individuals on teams face challenges such as experiencing emotions of denial, sadness, disorientation, or the need to let go of old identities and attachments (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969). Leaders must use Emotional Intelligence (EQ) to manage both their own emotions and those of their team members, providing support and validation to navigate the discomfort of this phase. Key leadership behaviors include decisiveness to provide clear direction as old structures are dismantled (DeRue et al., 2011). Maslow's physiological and safety needs are critical during this phase, emphasizing the stability of employment benefits and job security to alleviate fears (Maslow, 1943). During the Neutral Zone, leaders and individuals on teams experience a decrease in productivity and motivation. This phase offers opportunities for creativity and renewal. Leadership behaviors focusing on adaptability and innovation are essential, as the old ways are left behind, but new methods are not yet fully operational (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011). Leaders should encourage experimentation with new roles and establish routines to provide structure, along with setting short-term goals to maintain focus. This aligns with Maslow's safety, love, and belonging needs, supporting a sense of community and collaboration as structures dissolve (Maslow, 1943). The New Beginning involves building competence and confidence in new roles, continuous reinforcement, and the celebration of milestones. Leadership behaviors include articulating a clear vision for the future and energizing team members to embrace new opportunities (Judge et al., 2002). It is important during this phase to ensure that new processes and behaviors are adopted and reinforced (DeRue et al., 2011). In terms of Maslow's hierarchy, the focus shifts to esteem and self-actualization needs,

recognizing achievements and encouraging personal development aligned with the organization's goals (Maslow, 1943).

This synthesis of Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), alongside identified leadership behaviors, provides a framework for understanding how leaders can effectively support and guide their teams through the complexities of the Neutral Zone in crises. By aligning these frameworks, the study aims to provide a road map of the dynamic nature of leadership and the multifaceted needs of individuals on teams during significant organizational change and crisis. This approach not only informs the theoretical underpinnings of the study but also guides the investigation into how leaders can effectively support themselves and the individuals on their teams during periods of significant disruption (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judges et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Chapter Two Summary

Leaders face numerous obstacles as they navigate crises, and these events shape their leadership. A leader's background, traits, and behaviors influence how they adapt and support others. Lincoln and Shackleton navigated extreme and high-stress environments. They rose to the occasion. However, that is not always the case. The Storm King Mountain fire incident demonstrates that when purpose, roles, and expectations are not clearly defined, leaders and teams are ineffective in crises. The COVID-19 pandemic's distinctive nature was marked by isolation, duration, ambiguity, and basic-need disruption that highlights the importance of the constructed frameworks for this study that emphasize psychological adaptation and compassionate behavior.

Lincoln and Shackleton embody the spirit of a leader: intelligent, capable, and adaptive. They learned to navigate their respective crisis landscapes and built solid relationships with their teams. Their ability to adapt to the shifting purpose in crisis and then guide the people in their circle of influence through the process of psychologically adapting to the new reality demonstrates individuals with effective leadership traits and behaviors. They both created a sense of cohesion.

The crisis that Lincoln and Shackleton endured parallels the COVID-19 crisis leaders. Leaders make decisions and influence the team during unprecedented times. While there are many theoretical frameworks that apply to crisis situations, Bridges' Transition Model (2017) is an informative tool, though underutilized. Drawing upon a comprehensive theoretical framework encompassing Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, and Trait (Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016), this research study synthesis of literature highlights the pivotal role of psychological adaptation in facilitating effective leadership during times of crisis. Bridges' Transition Model (2017) provides a framework to examine how higher education leaders at one LGU responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and transition. Specifically, it explores how these leaders addressed individual team members and influenced their teams' capacity to perform effectively before and during the crisis. Chapter Three will outline the methodological approach to this research study and demonstrate how leaders' traits, behaviors, and approaches were analyzed. Furthermore, Chapter Three will identify the support and constraints to both leaders and individuals on teams during crisis situations. By aligning Bridges' Transition Model (2017), this research aims to provide insight into tools and strategies that

leaders can use to support individuals and teams during organizational transitions, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective leadership before, during, and after times of crisis.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three describes the methodological framework that guided this qualitative research study. It details the research design, data collection methods, analysis procedures, and strategies implemented to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. This chapter explains the processes used to examine leadership within higher education before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on one large western Land Grant University (LGU).

This research design uses both (1) a single-case analysis to paint a narrative of each interviewee and (2) a cross-case analysis to identify themes and patterns across the participants' experiences. Guided by Glesne (2016), Braun & Clarke (2006), and Yin (2018) this approach enhanced the methodological rigor and interpretation of the interviews. The study's conceptual framework aligned with Bridges' Transition Model (2017) and allowed for exploration of how leaders experienced the transition caused by COVID-19 through the Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning. The overarching goal was to connect theory and practice by generating insights into how higher education leaders adapted, evolved, and sustained their teams amid organizational disruption.

To strengthen this study's contribution, the COVID-19 pandemic was treated not simply as a general crisis, but as a distinct and unprecedented form of disruption. Unlike political, military, or institutional crises, the pandemic quickly produced physical isolation, interrupted essential human and organizational needs (i.e. safety, belonging, communication), and offered no clear entity or person to blame. These factors shaped leaders' responses and the context of their decision-making.

Researcher's Positionality

My personal and professional identity is grounded in the Japanese concept of ikigai (Garcia & Miralles, 2017). Ikigai encompasses what one loves, what one is good at, what the world needs, and what one can be paid for. This framework reflects not only how I approached my career but also how I understood my role as a researcher, educator, and leader in higher education. Each dimension of my ikigai (Garcia & Miralles, 2017) informs my worldview, positionality, and the lens through which I engaged in research.

What I am Good At: Growing up in a family business instilled in me an understanding of responsibility, teamwork, and persistence. These early experiences taught me that leadership begins with showing up and contributing to the team. As a first-generation college student who paid my way through undergraduate studies by teaching piano, I developed a strong work ethic and appreciation for access and equity in education. These experiences shaped my commitment to supporting students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, influencing how I interpret and engage with participants in my research. For example, Leader B was from a large family and first-generation student, so I connected more with the content from that interview than some of the other interviews.

What the World Needs: I believe education is a game changer for transformation. I have experienced firsthand how education expands possibilities and redefines an individual's sense of purpose. My own academic and professional journey from Cal Poly undergraduate student to Dean of Students and doctoral candidate has reinforced my conviction that accessible and mission-driven education can change lives. This belief informs my ethical stance as a researcher.

What I Can Be Paid For: Professionally, my career in educational leadership and administration ranging from event coordination and recruitment to Dean of Students and

researcher have given me a strong sense of purpose with my studies. My current role as the Assistant Director at the Children's School of Science requires both analytical skills and human connection. As a scholar-practitioner, I occupy a space where applied knowledge meets inquiry, and I view my research as an extension of my professional growth to advance my understanding and practice within the field of education.

As a doctoral candidate, I acknowledge that my positionality as a first-generation college student, California Polytechnic alumna, educator, and leader shaped the lens through which I viewed this research study. My experiences with transition and growth, both personal and professional, have heightened my views on change that participants in my study navigated during the COVID-19 pandemic. I approached each narrative with an awareness that my interpretations were informed by my own journey through challenge, perseverance, and purpose.

In summary, my *ikigai* influences the way I interpreted and interacted with the interviewees and the data. It reflects a life philosophy consistent with the framework guiding this study: Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), Bridges' Transition Model (2017), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and the Kübler-Ross Model (1969). Through this lens, my research became both a scholarly and a personal journey. This work represents a way to contribute to what I believe the world needs the most: compassionate and competent leaders.

Research Design

This qualitative study investigated how higher education leaders responded to the COVID-19 crisis and how their leadership traits, behaviors, and approaches adapted over time. The design incorporated Trait and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002;

Northouse, 2016), as well as the conceptual framework of Bridges' Transition Model (2017), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and the Kübler-Ross Model (1969).

Initially, I sought to collect and analyze a full set of data from 22 recorded interviews across two time periods (Spring 2020 and Spring 2021). However, due to a university-wide cloud storage loss and a personal technology failure, only partial data was recovered, prompting the collection of five additional interviews in Fall 2025. Like a bone that strengthens at the point of fracture, this disruption resulted in a more robust study that includes six sets of field notes and narrative summaries from Spring 2020 interviews, one full transcript from Spring 2020, one printed transcript and two Zoom recordings from Spring 2021, and five complete interview transcripts from Fall 2025. These ten participants, who are referred to as Leaders B through K, provided a rich yet partial dataset that still supported the qualitative analysis that represented the turmoil created by the crisis.

Participants were identified as leaders based on two criteria: (1) their hierarchy within the university or state system (i.e. directors, executive positions) and (2) evidence (i.e. through reputation, peer reference, or self-description) that they were recognized by others for demonstrating leadership behaviors beyond administrative management. This definition intentionally distinguishes leadership from positional authority and reflects the "leadership is everywhere" continuum.

Data Collection, Setting, and Participants

This research was conducted at a single large western LGU and includes interviews collected across three phases. The pre-pandemic phase (Spring 2020) involved in-person interviews that explored leaders' thinking, behaviors, and approaches of workplace climate and culture just as the COVID-19 virus began spreading across the United States, but before the

university transitioned to virtual learning. The during-pandemic phase (Spring 2021) consisted of virtual interviews capturing leaders' real-time responses to the evolving pandemic and its institutional challenges. The post-pandemic reflection phase (Fall 2025) included both in-person and virtual interviews in which leaders reflected on their experiences before, during, and after the pandemic.

The participants included eight campus-level leaders and two state-level leaders who collaborated closely with them. All participants held leadership roles before, during, and after the pandemic. They were decision-makers whose choices directly influenced teams, operations, or institutional policies. Some of the participants were invited to reflect on the leadership of colleagues. For instance, several were asked about their backgrounds and the mentorship they received along the way. This allowed the data to capture peer recognition and contextual validation of leadership behaviors while maintaining confidentiality.

Initially, the on-site, in-person setting aligned with Glesne's (2016) recommendation, emphasizing settings that enable direct engagement and close observation. This was facilitated by my unique positionality as an employee within the department where many leaders worked, affording me professional access to numerous senior-level leaders. My insider role as a part-time employee provided access to many senior-level leaders and afforded a unique dual perspective. I mitigated potential bias by transitioning out of roles that were at the university.

My professional role as a colleague and employee could have influenced the information leaders shared, potentially leading them to share more openly because I had a positive working relationship with many of them or, in some cases, perhaps leaders withheld information due to my insider positionality. I implemented strategies to mitigate this bias. I maintained researcher

journal entries to reflect on the interactions and engaged in regular peer debriefings with classmates and professors to challenge my interpretations and ensure a balanced view of the data. Additionally, as a woman, my identity may have shaped the dynamics of these interviews in various ways. For instance, female leaders might have felt a shared connection, potentially opening up more about the challenges of women's leadership. Recognizing the influence of my social identity, I remained vigilant in acknowledging how it could impact the interactions and perceptions within the study, continually striving to interpret the data with an awareness of these underlying dynamics.

As the study unfolded, the second set of interviews was conducted virtually in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic reshaped the research landscape, transitioning to a fully virtual format and platform. This shift was critical to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants, reflecting the adaptability required during unprecedented times (Bell et al., 2016).

Spring 2020 (Before the Pandemic)

This phase included 8 in-person interviews and one virtual interview with leaders at the LGU. Interviews ranged from 17 to 60+ minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol. Six sets of interview notes and six narrative summaries were recovered, along with one full transcript and fragments from one interview stored in course-related projects. Audio files and most digital transcripts were lost due to data corruption.

Spring 2021 (During Pandemic)

This phase was conducted virtually using Teams and Zoom platforms. Interviews focused on how leadership shifted during the pandemic. While the Teams recordings and auto-transcripts were deleted due to a university-wide cloud storage deletion, one printed transcript and two Zoom recordings were recovered.

Fall 2025 (Post-Pandemic)

Five interviews were conducted with leaders reflecting on leadership before, during, and after the pandemic. These interviews were successfully recorded and transcribed.

Additional Context

The first set of interviews was conducted during the spring 2020 semester right before the campus shifted to a virtual experience. Only one interview was conducted virtually because it was scheduled for March 16, 2020, which was the day the campus started shutting down in-person experiences. As the crisis unfolded, I conducted a second round of interviews to capture the immediate impacts and responses, providing insight into how perceptions and realities shifted during the crisis. This dual-phase approach enriched my data set, offering valuable insights and an opportunity to design a comparative research study highlighting leadership before and during a crisis framed by Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Additional Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016) and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011; Northouse, 2016) were drawn on throughout the research study. During the summer 2024 semester when data corruption and university-wide cloud storage deletion occurred, I had a unique opportunity to revisit leaders after the pandemic. One limitation is that many of the leaders had resigned, retired, passed away, and received job opportunities at other universities. It was challenging to contact some of them, but I was able to collect five interviews from the original set of nine on-campus participants.

Interview I

Initially, the interview protocol was designed to examine leaders' traits and behavior in shaping a positive work environment. The data collection involved audio recordings. I transcribed several of the interviews for my class project. I applied Bird's (2005) transcription

method, carefully capturing verbal and non-verbal elements like pauses and intonations to deepen data engagement. I reviewed audio recordings multiple times to ensure transcript accuracy. This transcription process evolved in the second set of interviews. I supplemented the data collection process with note taking on Google Docs during and immediately following the interviews and kept a digital researcher journal to inform the analysis Glesne (2016).

First Set of Interview Protocol Questions

These interview questions evolved over time, but the core of the questions remained the same throughout the process.

1. Describe your path into leadership? In other words, what is your story?
2. Are you a natural leader or do you work to be a leader?
3. What is your primary purpose for being in leadership? How do you convey your LGU's mission to your team?
4. Describe three characteristics of a strong leader.
5. You do a lot of meaningful work creating an environment of inclusivity on campus. Tell me more about your team and the work you are doing here at your LGU?
6. How are successes shared on your team? How are failures addressed? How are conflicts resolved?
7. This is my first year in my program, so I am a new researcher and am learning how to develop informative questions. Is there anything else you would like to share about your thinking (ideas) and behavior (actions) within your leadership role at your LGU that I missed? In other words, what is your secret sauce?!

Optional: Would you like to share your Top Five Strengths Finder Results?

Interview II & III

In this second phase of the study, the purpose evolved from understanding leaders navigating crises and exploring the responses of higher education leaders at a LGU during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on individual support and team performance. It examined how leaders adapted their strategies to enhance team resilience and effectiveness, adjusting leadership traits and behaviors as needed.

Additionally, the second set of interviews shifted entirely to online platforms, utilizing virtual interviews using Teams meetings. The interviews were recorded and were transcribed for analysis. The Teams platform transcribed the interviews, and then I went through and reviewed them for accuracy (Bird, 2005). The interview protocol underwent deliberate modifications to incorporate additional open-ended questions, allowing ample space for leaders to share information they felt was significant in relation to their unique roles within the institutions. As the study progressed, the protocol demonstrated adaptability to accommodate the unforeseen challenges leaders encountered due to the pandemic and the research purpose shifted to understanding how administrators lead during a time of crisis. This strategic adjustment aimed to gain deeper insights into their traits and behaviors before, during, and after the crisis, providing an understanding of their experiences amid unprecedented circumstances. This flexible approach in refining the interview protocol speaks to the study's commitment to capturing the evolving dynamics of leadership during times of crisis.

This set of interviews included most of the leaders from the original interviews, with the valuable addition of new leadership hires and a few participants referred by some leaders in the state's higher education department office. The inclusion of these new voices was prompted by the widespread suspension of entrance exams (e.g., ACT and SAT) during the pandemic, a decision significantly influenced by the testing facilities' closures. The state's higher education

department played a crucial role in shaping the policies that led to these shifts in university admissions processes. These additional interviews not only enriched the dataset but also provided context for understanding the diverse stakeholders involved in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic. This expanded perspective ensures a robust exploration of the multifaceted landscape that these leaders were navigating.

Interview Set I focused on leadership traits and team dynamics in pre-crisis environments.

Interview Sets II and III were refined to explore leaders' responses during and after the crisis, integrating questions about adaptation, resilience, and shifting definitions of leadership.

Second and Third Set of Interviews Protocol Questions

1. Describe three characteristics of a strong leader.
2. How do you define leadership? Has your definition stayed the same or shifted during the pandemic?
3. Describe how your path into leadership has served you during COVID-19.
4. Prior to the pandemic I asked, "Where do you place yourself on the leadership spectrum ranging from natural leader to must work to be a leader?" Do you place yourself in the same range or has it shifted over the past year?
5. What is your primary purpose for being in leadership? How do you convey your mission to your team during challenging times?
6. Over this past year, how have successes been shared on your team? How have you addressed failures? How have you resolved conflicts?
7. Covid-19 has affected education on many levels. Has it affected your leadership abilities? If yes, what adjustments have you made and how effective do you think the changes have been?

8. What is a metaphor for your leadership style over the past year?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your thinking (ideas) and behavior (actions) within your leadership role from this past year at CSU that I have missed?

Secondary Data

In addition to the primary data collected through interviews, this study incorporates secondary data in the form of field notes and researcher journal entries. As recommended by Glesne (2016), these supplementary sources served to enrich the analysis by providing context and capturing subtle aspects of the lived experiences of leaders during and after the crisis. Field notes were taken during and after the interviews, documenting observations, non-verbal cues, and any additional insights that emerged in the interview settings (Emerson et al., 2011). Journal entries further contribute to this dataset, capturing reflections, thoughts, and impressions throughout the data collection process. This dual approach to data collection, encompassing both primary and secondary sources, enhances the depth of the study, facilitating a more robust exploration of leadership dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic (Glesne, 2016).

Data Analysis

The analysis used constructed single-case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995) and cross-case (Miles et al., 2020; Yin, 2018) analyses by theme, aligning with the principles set forth by Glesne (2011) and drawing on thick description (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Geertz, 1973; Glesne, 2016). The single-case analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995) served as a phase that facilitated an in-depth exploration of each leader's unique story, with a focus on creating a narrative that described their distinct traits and behaviors (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002). This process contributed to a rich and detailed understanding of individual experiences through thick description (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Geertz, 1973; Glesne, 2016). The

cross-case analysis extends the exploration, drawing comparisons and identifying overarching themes within the data to construct a more comprehensive study. This analytical approach, incorporating both single-case and cross-case analyses, created connections, built on themes, and identified patterns that interconnected leaders' shared experiences throughout the crisis, providing a solid foundation for understanding the complexities of leadership in times of upheaval.

Throughout the cross-case analysis, direct participant quotations were integrated to maintain the “humanness” of the data. These quotes are included in Chapter Four and amplify the voice of each participant so that their voices are preserved to ensure the findings remain grounded in participants’ lived experiences.

Drawing on the thematic analysis framework, I identified and analyzed patterns within the qualitative data set through inductive coding, providing depth and insight into the lived experiences of higher education leaders. This allowed for categories to be constructed from the data. This study used a coding approach aligned with Braun and Clarke (2006) and Glesne (2016) to analyze the qualitative interviews, highlighting the lived experiences of leaders before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic within a higher education setting. By utilizing an inductive coding method and both single-case and cross-case thematic analyses, I sought to uncover the dynamic nature of leadership amid crisis, emphasizing the balance leaders maintained between team needs, personal well-being, and long-term strategic planning. To analyze the data, I followed a multi-step inductive coding process. First, I read through each transcript and set of field notes multiple times to gain familiarity with the content, jotting down initial impressions and possible codes in the margins. Next, I conducted open coding, labeling meaningful units of data, phrases, sentences, or ideas related to leadership traits, behaviors,

emotional responses, and organizational dynamics. These codes were then grouped into broader categories reflecting Bridges' Transition Model (2017) Endings, Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings phases, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011). After refining and collapsing similar codes, I identified recurring patterns across participants to develop initial themes. Throughout this process, I used memos to capture analytic thoughts, questions, and insights, which informed later stages of interpretation. I then examined the relationships between themes and compared individual leader experiences (Boyatzis, 1998). Finally, I synthesized these findings into cross-case themes that directly connected to the theoretical frameworks guiding this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This analysis approach aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis process of generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis.

Emphasizing an inductive coding approach, this study follows Creswell and Poth's (2018) strategies for qualitative inquiry which emphasize the construction of themes from the data rather than imposing preconceived categories. This inductive process, supported by Glesne's (2016) insights into qualitative research enables the exploration of how leaders evolve and adapt amidst challenging times. Through careful analysis and coding of interview transcripts, as recommended by Glesne (2016) and Miles et al., (2019) this study made visible the dynamic leadership traits and behaviors that the participants describe as critical for navigating transitions. The thematic analysis used in this study is informed by Braun and Clarke (2021) and Glesne (2016). It placed a strong emphasis on identifying and analyzing recurring patterns, concepts, and ideas that emerged during both single-case and cross-case analyses. This method allowed for a systematic identification of common themes, serving as threads that wove the data together. By

examining these themes, the analysis delved into key traits and behaviors exhibited by each leader, offering a perspective on their experiences during the crisis. The significance of thematic analysis lies in its ability to distill the essence of the data, bringing forth meaningful insights and connections that contributed to a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics in the face of challenges (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Denis et al., 2010; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Northouse, 2016).

By incorporating both single-case (Day, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995) and cross-case (Miles et al., 2020; Yin, 2018) analyses by theme, this research study's approach ensured a holistic understanding of the traits and behaviors of leaders within the institution. This approach enabled a broad comparison across multiple leader narratives, enhancing the understanding of leadership traits and behaviors during various contexts. This comprehensive analytical framework contributed not only to theoretical insights but also to practical applications of the data, aligning with qualitative research principles (Glesne, 2016) and emphasizing the importance of thick description (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The dual analytical approach enabled a nuanced exploration of individual narratives while also drawing connections across cases, providing a well-rounded perspective on leadership dynamics during times of crisis. This methodological approach provides valuable insights that bridge the gap between theory and practice within qualitative research. Supported by the works of Creswell & Poth (2018) and Patton (2015), this study integrates a diverse blend of qualitative methodologies to create a solid foundation for investigating the lived experiences of higher education leaders before, during, and after the crisis.

Consent, Confidentiality, and Ethical Practices

Before conducting the initial set of interviews, I secured written consent from all participants via email, permitting the utilization of their interviews for my class research project. As the study progressed, I subsequently sought permission through email to incorporate the interviews into my doctoral dissertation. At the onset of each interview, I presented participants with the consent email statement and obtained their verbal consent for participation. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined the study to be “Not Human Subjects Research,” indicating that while exempt from continued oversight, it adhered to ethical standards and participant protection. This process demonstrates the IRB’s role in ensuring ethical compliance and participant safety in research.

Risks

The research study entailed several risks associated with engaging participants who held leadership roles during high-stress periods, particularly within the complex landscape of a higher education institute. First, the potential risk was on participants' time and increased stress due to additional interview commitments was carefully considered. Moreover, the sensitive nature of the interview data posed a risk, as participants, many of whom occupied executive and senior-level positions, expressed concerns about the impact of disclosed information on their professional reputations and within the political environment of the institution. Despite obtaining consent and assurances of confidentiality, the dynamic and political nature of leadership roles in the given context necessitates a vigilant and ethical approach to mitigate potential risks to both participants and the integrity of the research.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To establish trustworthiness, I used multiple validation strategies drawn from Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell and Poth (2018). Credibility was supported through triangulation of data sources, including interview transcripts, field notes, and researcher journal entries, ensuring that themes were grounded in multiple forms of evidence. The data was cross-checked with participants, allowing them to clarify or expand on statements where necessary from 2020 to 2025 during three separate checkpoint interviews.

Dependability was enhanced by maintaining notes, narratives, and transcripts. Transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) that allow readers to determine the applicability of findings to similar contexts. Together, these measures ensured that the data was analyzed with integrity and transparency, reflecting the authentic voices and lived experience of higher education leaders navigating a crisis (Gioia et al., 2013).

All interpretations and themes were constructed from Bridges' Transition Model (2017), Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and Trait and Behavior Theories (Judge et al., 2002; DeRue et al., 2011). The descriptions of leadership avoided using terms such as "effective" unless explicitly supported by participant or organizational evidence. Otherwise, I referred to the findings in more neutral tones avoiding terms like "effectiveness" and "great leaders."

Summary of Chapter Three

In summary, Chapter Three outlined the methodological foundation of this qualitative study, including research design, participant context, data collection, and the analytic process. The chapter emphasized the value of thematic analysis and clarified how data were constructed into themes through open coding and cross-case comparison. The integration of trustworthiness measures further ensured the study's rigor and reliability. Together, these methodological

components established a foundation for the findings presented in Chapter Four, where individual narratives and cross-case themes illustrate how higher education leaders adapted, learned, and led through unprecedented disruption.

Distinctive aspects of the pandemic (i.e. rapid onset, isolation, and disruption of basic human needs) were highlighted as the defining context of this study. The study incorporated multiple trustworthiness strategies (i.e. triangulation, memoing, and rich and thick description) to ensure analytic rigor. These components established the foundation for the findings in Chapter Four, where participants' voices and lived experiences illustrated how higher education leaders constructed meaning, adapted behaviors, and navigated transition through an unprecedented form of crisis.

Chapter Three detailed the ten leaders (B-K) and the three data-collection windows (before, during, and after the pandemic), along with semi-structured interviews, and field notes. The chapter emphasized the value of thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases and described the steps of open coding, comparison, and single-case and cross-case analyses to identify patterns in these leaders' experiences. To strengthen integrity, I incorporated multiple trustworthiness strategies, including triangulation of sources, memoing, and rich and thick description. These procedures clarify the analytic decisions, enhance credibility and dependability and make the study's logic transparent. Chapter Three describes the analysis process that sets the foundation for the findings in Chapter Four. Chapter Four highlights Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), the Kubler-Ross Model (1969), Bridges' Transition Model (2017), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Chapter Four presents the findings from interviews with ten leaders at one large western LGU regarding their perceptions and approaches to leadership before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter is organized into two main sections. Section I provides findings from the single-case analyses, offering an in-depth understanding of each leader's perceptions, traits, behaviors, and leadership approaches as they navigated crisis. Section II presents the findings from the cross-case thematic analysis, which identifies and interprets patterns across leaders' experiences. Five overarching themes were constructed through this analysis. Throughout both sections, the findings are interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), and Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) which highlights how leaders adapted, responded, and led through organizational change during the pandemic.

Single Case Analysis

This section presents the single-case analyses for Leaders B through K, each of whom served in key leadership roles at one large western LGU. Drawing from interviews conducted before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, these narratives illustrate how individual leaders perceived and enacted leadership amid disruption and organizational change. Each case highlights distinct leadership traits, behaviors, and adaptive strategies as interpreted through Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), and Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Together, these analyses provide an understanding of how leaders navigated transitions, supported their teams, and shaped institutional resilience during a period of significant uncertainty.

Single-Case Analysis: Leader B

Leader B was a dynamic, systems-minded leader who began her five-decade career at the university as a student ambassador and later rose to serve on the executive leadership team. Early in her life, she demonstrated an understanding of how people and processes interact. At one point in the interview, she recalled helping with the lunch line. She noticed when she gave students a little extra cake, they were more cooperative. That early lesson in motivation taught her ways of working with people that established a win-win approach.

As Director of Admissions, Leader B systematically analyzed every staff position to improve efficiency. She asked each employee to describe their duties while she took careful notes. One employee explained that she had to spend hours preparing documentation that she shared with another department. Leader B asked what that department did with the transcripts. The employee did not know. Leader B investigated and discovered that the other department was shredding the documents. This employee had been spending hours on a work process that was outdated. Leader B eliminated the employee's documentation duties, and the employee was able to devote her attention to more impactful and meaningful projects. She also identified a software flaw that rejected applicants whose last names contained only two letters. Leader B felt that this software did not provide students with two letter last names with the ability to apply to the university. Leader B met with the team and worked with the software company to correct the glitch in the software that was preventing many students from the Philippines, China and Japan from applying. Leader B's "secret sauce" was asking questions and revising inefficient systems. By addressing both system and human needs, Leader B produced measurable gains: redundant paperwork was removed, processing times shortened, and morale improved. The

smoother admissions process reflected her capacity to link structural redesign while improving higher education access.

Before the pandemic, Leader B demonstrated high Conscientiousness and Openness, focusing on systems, removal of outdated processes (i.e. unnecessary documentation) and redesigned staff roles to increase efficiency. Leader B encompasses high levels of Agreeableness by checking in on staff (i.e. mail room staff). This leader demonstrated low Neuroticism and showed up emotionally stable under pressure (Judge et al., 2002). Overall this leader was Task-Oriented (i.e. clear roles, processes), Relational-Oriented (i.e. listening, advocacy, recognition), and Change-Oriented (i.e. piloting a new admissions system) which aligns with DeRue et al. (2011). This approach met some key foundational needs for the staff including safety and stability by being predictable and nurturing, belonging through regular connection, and esteem through visible support. All these factored into this leader, creating a space where staff had a sense of security and ability to be productive (Maslow, 1943).

Leader B was comfortable with Endings and well versed in letting go of inefficient routines. This leader guided the team through the Neutral Zone with clarity and reassurance. As a result, the team was able to build a meaningful New Beginning (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). During the pandemic, the same pattern of traits and behaviors emerged: high Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness paired with low Neuroticism (DeRue et al., 2011, Judge et al., 2002). Leader B set a work environment foundation that allowed staff to navigate complex emotions that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. The staff could grieve and move from early confusion and frustration toward acceptance and shared meaning through transparent updates, patience, and empathy (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Leader B set staff up to psychologically adapt by focusing on systems and improving them over time, so they were efficient.

Additionally, this leader's ability to care for each team member was evident through the ability to let go, anchor actions in purpose, create relational security, and meaning making. This approach built trust over time. Leader B emphasized trust as a cornerstone of crisis leadership stating, "Trust became probably the biggest and most important word. I needed to trust the people who worked for me, even though I couldn't see them day to day. While some leaders demanded minute by minute reports from remote staff, Leader B did not micromanage. Leader B explained, "We started Friday get-togethers. You didn't have to talk about work; we just needed to continue to connect."

Her compassion extended beyond conversation to concrete gestures. She explained another moment where she called an employee and said, "What are you having for dinner tonight?" When the employee responded with "I don't know." She took the initiative and told them, "I'm giving you my credit-card number, order from a nice place." She also authorized supplemental pay for overextended staff and celebrated kindnesses such as an employee who "made pillows for people...with themes for each person."

These actions captured Leader B's belief that, while efficiency before the pandemic (i.e. addressing software issues and staff tasks), during the pandemic Leader B shifted to a more relational-orientation, emphasizing connection, empathy, and team support.

There was no post-pandemic arc for this case due to the leader's passing (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Leader C

Leader C's colleagues highlighted this leader's ability to listen, hear, and see them. They felt that Leader C understood their needs as employees and wanted to know their stories. Leader C shared that a colleague once reflected that what they appreciated about her was that, "She

makes time to really see people, not just hear what they do, but who they are.” Leader C did not actively seek out leadership roles. When asked how she came into leadership, she explained, “A chance encounter with a former colleague on the university lawn led to additional leadership opportunities opening up.” Leader C had built strong relationships all over campus and colleagues readily acknowledged Leader C’s ability to contribute to a team. In the interview Leader C struck a balance between conveying confidence and vulnerability.

Leader C infused the team with purpose to carry out the university’s mission and was quick to respond, “Be consistent. It’s important to know why we are doing what we are doing. The university has a Land Grant mission and ethos.” Leader C believed the university’s purpose was to transform lives through education. Leader C stated, “Education makes all the difference, especially for first generation students.” At the end of the interview when I asked Leader C about having “secret sauce” this leader responded with a smile, “I’m competitive. I love to play.”

Based on a single pre-pandemic narrative, this case reflects high Extraversion (i.e. confident, relational energy, playful), high Openness (i.e. embraced experiential learning and diverse viewpoints), high Agreeableness (i.e. warmth, inclusion, affirmation), high Conscientiousness (i.e. purposeful follow-through), and low Neuroticism (Judge et al., 2002). Behaviorally, this leader was Relational-Oriented (i.e. listening, story-sharing, trust-building) paired with Change-Oriented behaviors (i.e. access-driven LGU mission) and Task-Oriented behaviors as well to keep the work environment structured (DeRue et al., 2011). Leader C focused on staff needs (Maslow, 1943). This leader created a high level of belonging (i.e. community and mission emphasis), esteem (i.e. recognition and confidence-building), and touched on self-actualization by inviting staff to create meaningful student experiences. Safety was created indirectly through purposeful and predictable leadership actions (Maslow, 1943).

This leader's secret sauce was anchoring people in meaning and purpose before the crisis. This set the team up for navigating the challenges that inevitably accompany Endings and transitioned the team into the Neutral Zone with an ability to be innovative (i.e. experimental and playful approach to problems). Even with just this one data point, this leader set the team up to move through a Neutral Zone toward New Beginning by normalizing innovation (Bridges', 2017). Although no during and after the pandemic data is available because the data collected during the pandemic was lost due to technological corruption and this leader moved on from the LGU shortly after, the pre-crisis leadership traits and behaviors indicate that this leader had the capacity to help the team work their way through confusion toward acceptance with a shared purpose (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011, Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969, Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Leader D

A Bridge Builder: Leader D was a unifier. This leader knew how to build relationships and keep peace. Leader D suggested that perhaps these abilities were developed from being the middle child. Leader D's Swedish boss in high school provided mentorship. He trusted Leader D at the age of fourteen with the keys to everything. Leader D advised him on ordering stock and worked at the shop all throughout high school and college. In college, the Dean of Students mentored Leader D throughout student government involvement. Due to Leader D's skill at building relationships, Leader D was offered a job at the university after graduating. Leader D cited a number of these types of opportunities that opened career paths. Leader D's professional life was marked by building relationships and those relationships paving the way for leadership role opportunities. Leader D's bosses, colleagues, and mentors all saw this leader's potential and helped develop Leader D's leadership ability. Leader D's bridge-builder quality was recognized

by a former Admissions director and led to Leader D being selected as the Director of Admissions.

Leader D was a combination of high Extraversion (i.e. energized by in-person connections), high Conscientiousness (i.e. organized, prone to over analyzing), high agreeableness (i.e. listening, validation), low Neuroticism (i.e. even-keeled steadiness), and high Openness (Judge et al., 2002). Through a behavior lens, this leader leaned heavily into Relational-Orientation (i.e. bridge-building, mentoring, trust) and Task-Oriented behaviors (i.e. policies, expectations) and Change-Orientation (i.e. tuning processes as processes evolved) which aligns with DeRue et al. (2011). Leader D addressed the needs of the staff by creating safety (i.e. predictable norms), belonging (i.e. approachability, mentoring), and esteem (recognition, coaching), and supporting growth with purpose (Maslow, 1943).

During the pandemic, the transition arc followed Bridges' (2017) Transition Model by letting go of familiar office routines representing an Ending, navigating a "survival-mode" Neutral Zone marked by uncertainty, and then stepping into a New Beginning through team stabilization and renewed sense of vision (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). This case touched on the emotional journey leaders and individuals on teams move through before, during, and after a crisis. In this case, Leader D discussed a feeling of loss when daily in-person rhythms were changed during the pandemic. Leader D had to navigate being flexible and bargaining with staff about new norms. This leader felt concern as enrollment risks became even more pressing during the pandemic. Finally, this leader was able to move toward acceptance and meaning-making with the team by reframing, empathy, and consistent communication (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Overall, psychological adaptation was achieved by coupling systems and standards with relational security with a steady presence, mentoring, and purpose driven message. This enabled the team

to work toward stabilization (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Leader E

Leader E never sought visibility yet consistently stabilized the systems that others relied upon. From the very start of the interview, this leader emphasized that the path into leadership “wasn’t by choice, but by capability.” When departments faltered, Leader E stepped in not for recognition, but because, as this leader said, “things weren’t getting fixed that I knew I could fix.” Leader E’s leadership style was calm, methodical, and transparent. During the pandemic, when many sought direction, this leader became a stabilizing part of the team who kept the infrastructure running and the teams grounded through practical problem-solving, consistency, and care informed by logic. Though Leader E insisted, “I don’t see myself as a leader,” this leader’s actions demonstrated a different story.

Before the pandemic, Leader E demonstrated low Extraversion (i.e. preferred working in the background), high Conscientiousness (i.e. discipline, integrity, follow-through), moderate Agreeableness (i.e. fairness, transparency), moderate Openness (i.e. willing to redesign systems and adopt technology), and low Neuroticism (i.e. calm, steady) (Judge et al., 2002). This leader had a high level of Task-Oriented (i.e. clear expectations, streamlined processes), paired with a moderate focus on Relational-Oriented (i.e. predictable communication, equitable treatment) and moderate Change-Oriented (i.e. incremental systems fixes) (DeRue et al., 2011). Leader E created a safe and stable work environment through clear role responsibilities, transparent communication, and rational guidelines. Overall, this leader created a space of belonging, esteem that was supported by routine check-ins, and validation of diverse stress responses and growth which was enabled with practical skill-building and tool adoption (Maslow, 1943).

The transition arc reflected an Ending that required letting go of in-person routines and familiar checkpoints, a well-managed Neutral Zone that led into collaborative problem-solving, and movement toward New Beginnings that encompassed new procedures and norms (Bridges', 2017). The emotional arc of the team moved from confusion and frustration toward acceptance as expectations were stabilized and purpose reframed around reliable service and reliable operations (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Overall, this case highlighted a competence and systems-oriented thinker that created a calm environment that executes tasks at a high level through transparent communication and flexibility during times of instability before and during the crisis (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Leader F

Leader F was a mission-driven, people-first operator who stated, "It's my job to serve the staff I work with." Before, during, and after the crisis, this leader minimized uncertainty by modeling a calm decisiveness and kept the team tethered to purpose, explaining, "Let's control the things we can." Leader F believed in the power of education. This leader articulated commitment to the Land Grant mission early in the interview and emphasized the value in helping students tap into their potential. Leader F's path to the Admissions leadership team began as a part-time employee as a graduate student. This leader's ability to take the initiative and flexibility to work with others set the foundation stones and commitment to the university mission and ability to hire hard working and qualified employees. This leader advocated for staff needs and felt accountable to them as a team. Leader F was a visionary who focused on the big picture. Leader F valued fellow colleagues. This leader discussed Leader E's ability to complete business process analysis and ask the core questions. Leader F acknowledged the

marketing team leader had an ability to help people understand strategy. Leader F was quick to note the Admissions Director's ability to bring the human side to conversations through listening and an ability to build relationships. Leader F summarized Leader G's ability by describing this leader as a phenomenal mentor to a team that is often young and susceptible to high turnover due to the entry level nature of the Admissions counselor positions that Leader G supervised. Leader F understood the needs of the team and focused on the purpose of the team. Leader F was aware of the "pressure point" that teams often reach and tried to restructure when it seemed like the team needed a "temperature adjustment."

Leader F reflected high Extraversion (i.e. readily stepped forward as a spokesperson), high Conscientiousness (i.e. organized, reliable follow-through), high Agreeableness (i.e. people-first stance), high Openness (i.e. creativity over competition), and moderate Neuroticism (i.e. calm under stress and privately managed frustration) (Judge et al., 2002). Behaviorally, this leader emerged as a Task-Oriented (i.e. prioritized, decisive) and Relational-Oriented ("people over task," feedback without retribution, bridge-builder) and practical Change-Oriented (i.e. reframing problems, finding new ways to connect). According to DeRue et al., (2011) this trio of behaviors are most predictive of outcomes. Leader F focused on meeting the needs of the team and created a safe and stable environment using strong communication skills. Additionally, this leader created a sense of belonging through intentional check-ins and lighthearted rituals. Leader F built esteem by recognizing wins and touched on self-actualization by ensuring that work focused on a shared student-serving mission (Maslow, 1943). Leader F stated, "We're here to change lives...administrative stuff is how we help make that happen."

The transition arc moved through Bridges' Transition Model (2017) phases by acknowledging Endings (i.e. loss of in-person culture); holding the Neutral Zone with

normalized uncertainty, flexible schedules, and steady information to create relational security during chaos; and moving toward New Beginnings by recommitting to purpose and workable practices (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Emotionally, the case aligned with Kubler-Ross's stages of grief beginning with denial and frustration at obstacles, moving through discouragement and toward acceptance and meaning-making by reframing compassionate and mission-focused messaging (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The overall impact of this leader's traits and behaviors created a work experience that was as consistent as possible through the crisis (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Leader G

Leader G shared, "I don't lead like a man, I lead like a woman." This leader emphasized the importance of reclaiming what it is to be a woman in leadership and flipped the script. Leader G defined her role in terms of collaboration and explained that good ideas come from all parts of the organization. She took pride in the fact that the people above her listed so that she could act as a liaison between her hard-working team and the Office of Admissions core leadership team. She emphasized kindness, putting people at ease, and eliminating the intimidation factor that comes with her title. Leader G emerged as a leader during her time of service in the United States Army. The military revealed her ability to be a problem solver. One of her strengths was being "able to see a clear path forward" amidst chaos. However, she was quick to point out that while she was always recognized for her leadership skills, she did not consider herself a "natural leader." Leader G explained that she worked to be a leader by reading a tremendous amount of leadership literature. At the end of the interview, she encouraged me to read one of her favorite leadership books, *Call Sign Chaos* by General James Mattis, demonstrating how as a leader. This

highlighted her focus on lifting other people up and providing resources for them to maximize their skills.

Before the crisis, Leader G demonstrated a high level of Agreeableness (non-punitive, trust-building feedback), high Conscientiousness (i.e. inviting diverse input and encouraging ideas), low Neuroticism, and moderate Extraversion (i.e. visible, available to staff) (Judge et al., 2002). Behaviorally, this leader centered all practices around a core Relational-Orientation that created psychological safety through listening and coaching the team but balanced this strength with Task-Orientation (i.e. expectations, feedback loops) and Change-Orientation (i.e. supporting practices based on staff voice) (DeRue et al., 2011). Leader G's focus was on creating safety with non-retaliatory practices and supporting a sense of belonging with inclusive conversations while building esteem through a growth-oriented recognition. Leader G touched on self-actualization by linking development plans to the LGU mission (Maslow, 1943).

The transition arc started with the Ending of letting go of blame and defend habits. Emotionally, a non-punitive approach helped staff move through denial of a crisis by creating a safe space to psychologically adapt during challenging times. There was only one point of data for this leader because of the second round of interviews being corrupted by a university systems backup failure. However, in summary this case highlights a leader who was stable, kind, set clear standards in a compassionate way, provided compassionate feedback, created a safe work environment, improved culture and absorbed shock and kept improving each day (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Leader H

Leader H's journey began in retail, where strong mentors cultivated a sense of accountability, consistency, and initiative. This leader transitioned to higher education and carried those traits

into higher education sharing, “I had a really strong store manager and a mentor who would say, ‘You have to go above and beyond on a regular basis.’” Leader H described those early lessons as on the job training in leadership.

Leader H was a hands-on, integrity-based, and consistent leader. This leader’s style focused on connecting with others and pairing people skills with a disciplined work ethic. This work ethic was forged in the retail industry. Leader H shared, “You can’t show up at 9:15 if the store opens at 9:30. You need to be there 45 minutes before your people come in.”

Leader H reflected high Extraversion (i.e. approachability, presence), high Conscientiousness (i.e. reliable follow-through and structured supervision), high Agreeableness (i.e. care for people, individualized recognition), high Openness (receptivity to new ideas, creative outreach), and low Neuroticism (i.e. steady, even-keeled demeanor) (Judge et al., 2002). This leader’s behaviors pivoted around Task-Orientation (i.e. organized management of recruiters, events, VIP visits), high Relational-Orientation (i.e. transparent communication, regular check-ins, tailored appreciation), and Change-Orientation (i.e. training, alumni engagement) (DeRue et al., 2011). During the pandemic, this leader focused on the needs of the team aligning with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Model (1943) and created strong sense of stability and safety with consistent communication and predictable routines. Additionally, this leader built an environment where the team felt that they belonged through community building in virtual spaces. Leader H built esteem with recognition and self-actualization through growth opportunities tied to the mission (Maslow, 1943).

The transition arc showed readiness to move through the Ending (letting go of fully in-person experiences), to the Neutral Zone (i.e. trial and error with hybrid engagement, clarity during chaos, relational security), and New Beginnings (i.e. institutionalized hybrid practices,

revived outreach, purpose reorientation). This leader's psychological adaptation leaned into letting go (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Overall, the leader processes denial and confusion (i.e. camera-off culture, remote hire hurdles) and frustration (i.e. resistance to new expectations) and moved through disorientation to acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Overall, this leader's secret sauce was a people-first, systems approach that stabilized the team and boosted morale. Leader H executed tasks at a high level with genuine care for the team (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Leader I

Leader I's leadership journey was defined by growth, humility, and composure. "I've found myself in leadership positions since childhood," she shared. "I have a very controlling personality type...understanding the difference between leading and controlling has been a constant learning opportunity." Over time this leader shifted from authority to influence, "You can effect more change through positive leadership versus control." Leader I demonstrated a balance of discipline, empathy, and adaptability. This leader led through steady presence rather than force, combining a structured, event-driven mindset with strong interpersonal awareness. This leader's journey was rooted in lessons learned from early tendencies toward control, but evolved into a philosophy of trust, transparency, and service. Leader I built systems that were efficient yet still took time to care for individuals on team, helping them navigate uncertainty of a changing landscape.

Before the crisis, reflected high Extraversion (i.e. strong presence, purposeful over-communication), high Conscientiousness (i.e. disciplined event execution and follow-through), high Agreeableness (i.e. empathy, recognition of others), high openness (i.e. experiential design, willingness to try new technology tools), and low Neuroticism (i.e. calm under deadline

pressure) (Judge et al., 2002). Leader I balanced Task-Orientation (i.e. clear roles, contingency plans), Relational-Orientation (i.e. coaching, feedback loops, public celebration of wins), and Change-Orientation (i.e. piloting experiential approaches) (DeRue et al., 2011). Leader I created a safe and stable work environment through predictable operations and backup plans and leaned into belonging through team rituals and student-centered experiences. Additionally, esteem was built with tailored recognition and skill development and touched on self-actualization by empowering creative ownership of projects (Maslow, 1943). During the pandemic, the transition arc moved through Endings which required letting go of legacy event routines, moving through Neutral Zone by navigating with steady and forward-looking leadership during chaos, and pushing through to the New Beginning that emerged with a hybrid model (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). This leader's secret sauce was the ability to guide the team through psychological adaptation by attending to the emotional process individuals go through during a crisis (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Department of Higher Education Leader J

Leader J's leadership focused on equity, evidence and empathy. This leader reflected on the process of making decisions during the pandemic, explained that "the test-optional trend has been a movement across the United States...to say, can we take another look at whether or not the SAT or ACT really give us the information we need to make an informed decision?" This leader's conviction focused on fairness and data which was evident when this leader shared, "The research has demonstrated, over and over, that it's not the best indicator. It's an indicator that really reinforces some of the inequities that already persist in the system." Leader J described how standardized testing created inequities emphasizing, "students who go to private high schools are going to score higher" and the pandemic became a "good opportunity to push it

through,” transforming a temporary pause into lasting change. This leader’s tone combined composure and clarity, “The question was does it do more harm than good?” For this leader, leadership meant amplifying the student voice and balancing competing pressures, “There’s a lot of voices on all different sides of this issue. I think ultimately, it’s the student voice that we want to amplify...what is the best thing for the highest number of students?” This leader saw equity not as ideology but as practice. In every explanation, Leader J demonstrated data-driven reasoning, care for access, and an individual who focused on policy leadership.

This case reflected an Extroverted leader (i.e. confident yet reflective communication), high Conscientiousness (i.e., disciplined reasoning, attention to multiple stakeholder perspectives), high agreeableness (i.e. empathy for students and families), high Openness (i.e. willingness to adapt long-standing policies), and low Neuroticism (i.e. steady, composed demeanor when addressing controversy) (Judge et al., 2002). From a behavioral perspective, Leader J integrated Task-Oriented behaviors (i.e., policy analysis, legislative coordination, data-driven practices), Relational-Oriented behaviors (i.e., listening to diverse viewpoints, balancing competing values), and Change-Oriented behaviors (i.e. using crisis as an opportunity for systemic improvement) (DeRue et al., 2011). These behaviors indicated the ability to create equitable pathways for students by supporting test-optional admissions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943), this leader prioritized belonging and esteem for marginalized student populations by advocating for fairer admissions practices and amplifying the student voice. Leader J acknowledged that standardized tests disproportionately favored privileged students, and the move toward test-optional and test-blind policies allowed for a more holistic assessment of each applicant. This decision addressed the psychological safety

and self-esteem needs of first-generation and underrepresented students who might otherwise have been excluded from opportunity based on inequitable testing structures.

Leader J's decision-making trajectory aligned closely with Bridges' Transition Model (2017). The Ending phase involved letting go of long-standing traditions of standardized testing as a measure of merit. The Neutral Zone was characterized by navigating debate and uncertainty among multiple stakeholders who held conflicting views about fairness, rigor, and access. Finally, the New Beginning represented the successful transition to test-optional practices. Throughout this process, Leader J used the crisis to help implement new policies that promoted student success during challenging times. While Leader J did not delve into the emotional arc during this interview this leader did navigate challenging times through transparent communication and reframed success around student potential rather than test performance.

Overall, Leader J's "secret sauce" was the ability to transform crisis into opportunity. This Leader leveraged the pandemic's disruptions to create systemic change. Leader J used the crisis to psychologically adapt to letting go of outdated practices, create a sense of renewed purpose, and increase access to students in higher education (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Single-Case Analysis: Department of Higher Education Leader K

Leader K balanced data-driven practices with strong interpersonal skills. This leader's traits and behaviors were rooted in a background that was shaped by family, "I'm the youngest of seven...and we all get along great" this leader shared, adding that the "voices of my brothers and sisters are in my head" when weighing choices, a habit that cultivated balanced judgement and collaboration across stakeholders. Professionally, this leader moved from admissions operations into state-wide policy work and approached the testing debate with methodical clarity

and calm. Leader K distinguished, “both...statute and policy,” explaining that legacy statute once required most admits to submit scores, while only a “20%...window” allowed discretion; during COVID, this leader helped secure “a one-year waiver” and then “make it permanent,” converting crisis into a data-informed pilot for test-optional reform. Leader K explained that students with different learning styles do not always perform well on standardized exams, and the exams become a barrier. This leader used a steady, evidence-driven, and people-first approach.

Leader K reflected moderate Extraversion (i.e. visible, personable), high Conscientiousness (i.e. methodical thinking around policy analysis, disciplined follow-through), high Agreeableness (i.e. relational-orientation, inclusive practices), high Openness (i.e. readiness to rethink old admissions practices), and low Neuroticism (i.e. calm, steady communication) (Judge et al., 2002). Behaviorally, this leader integrated Task-Oriented (i.e. policy changes), and Change-Oriented (i.e. using the pandemic waiver to pilot, assess, and then implement test-optional policies) (DeRue et al., 2011). This leader was the youngest of seven, had a strong sibling bond that was translated into a leadership practice that was able to work with many different types of people.

Leader K, leaned into Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) by targeting safety and stability for applicants by using predictable guidelines for applying to the university. This leader amplified belonging by normalizing non-submission of scores so first-generation, low-income, rural, students of color, and students with disabilities were not stigmatized. This leader promoted esteem through a holistic review emphasizing course rigor and GPA over standardized tests. This opened the door for self-actualization by expanding access to institutions that align with students’ long term academic goals. Leader K’s attention to disability advocacy further reduced barriers for all students.

Leader K's decision making aligned with the Bridges and Bridges Transition Model (2017) Ending by letting go of test-dependent practices that were embedded in statute and practice. This leader used the Neutral Zone to create space for discussion and implementation of test-optional practices and launched into the New Beginning marked by policy changes.

Leader K's decision-making aligned with Bridges' Transition Model (2017) Ending by letting go of test-dependent practices that were embedded in statute. This leader then used the Neutral Zone to create space for discussion and implementation of test-optional practices, ultimately launching into the New Beginning marked by policy change. Although Leader K did not delve into the emotional aspect of these decisions, it was evident that their "secret sauce" was the ability to use crisis as a catalyst for systemic change that advanced long-term student success by removing barriers to admissions through test-optional policies (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maslow, 1943).

Cross-Case Analysis by Theme

This section synthesizes patterns that emerged across the ten leaders' narratives. The themes were derived through coding, memoing, and comparison of sing-case analyses. Five overarching theme including Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), Kubler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and Bridges' Transition Model (2017) captured how leaders described navigating personal and organizational adaptation. This section reflects how leaders perceived the effectiveness of their approaches and how they articulated growth, stability, and meaning-making during crisis.

Theme 1: Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002)

Across cases, the most consistent trait was high Conscientiousness. The leaders interviewed for this study executed tasks and paid attention to details. Additionally, they had a high level of

Openness and they were willing to rethink events and systems. These leaders demonstrated low Neuroticism as well (Judge et al., 2002).

For example, Leaders B, E, and K paired Conscientiousness with Openness consistently across all of their interviews. They balanced structure with innovation to sustain team continuity. Leader E showed low Extraversion, but remained effective through calm competence, transparency, and communication. Leaders B and K had similar backgrounds, being from large families and supported their practices with well researched policies. Leaders C, D, F, G combined Extraversion with agreeableness, emphasizing approachability and trust with their open-door policies which created psychological safety. Leaders H and I blended Extraversion with Conscientiousness and Openness to innovation (Judge et al., 2002, Maslow, 1943).

Theme 2: Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011)

The most effective leaders consistently combined three behavior orientations:

Task-Orientation: Leaders B, E, and K demonstrated the strongest Task-Orientation. However, Leaders D, H, and I touched on this orientation often they just had other behavior orientations that emerged stronger.

Relational-Orientation: Leaders C, D, F, H, I, and J leaned into mentorship, check-ins, recognition, no retribution feedback. However, Leader B valued relationships as well. Both leaders C and J had backgrounds rooted in athletics and emphasized team dynamics.

Change-Orientation: Leaders C, F, H, and I all mentioned pivoting from in-person to virtual events and then evolving to a hybrid model. Leaders B and E had some Change-Oriented behaviors, but they were much higher with Task-Orientation (DeRue et al., 2011).

This behavioral integration allowed leaders to create both operational stability and emotional security, which they perceived as vital to sustaining performance during disruptions (DeRue et al., 2011).

Theme 3: The Kübler-Ross Model (1969)

Leaders' reflections illustrated emotional adaptation consistent with Kübler-Ross Model (1969). The leaders in this study demonstrated the ability to navigate the Kübler-Ross Model (1969) moving through confusion and denial to frustration and bargaining to discouragement and disorientation to acceptance and meaning-making. Many of the leaders paired structure with empathy. Many of these leaders navigated the early stages of confusion (i.e. camera-off norms, remote-hire challenges, and loss of routine). These were all noted by Leaders H, D, and F. During the middle stages resistance to new expectations and fatigue amid enrollment or workload anxieties were the most referenced by Leaders D and F. During the final stages acceptance grew when leaders normalized emotions, communicated transparently, recognized wins, and anchored purpose. Leaders D, E, F, and H leaned into the resolution of the stages of grief the most in their interviews. Leader B entered the pandemic already oriented toward acceptance behaviors (i.e. letting go of inefficient steps) (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Theme 4: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

Leaders who focused on purpose and meaning were able to give their teams a sense of safety and belonging, esteem and some touched on self-actualization. However, most of the leaders did not mention physiological needs (Maslow, 1943):

- Psychological Needs: Leaders B and E both mentioned taking care of their staff to make sure their basic needs were being taken care of at home. Leader B, in particular was the

most aware. This leader discussed making sure staff had food and even provided one of the staff members with a debit card to go and get something to eat during the pandemic.

- Safety and Stability: Leaders B, E, H, D, I, J, and K all discussed sending out predictable updates, defining roles, and leaning on reliable tools. Leaders J and K used crisis to pilot and launch new policies to support student success and stabilize student experiences.
- Belonging: Leaders C, D, F, G, H, I each mentioned being approachable, present, inclusive, coaching, and story-sharing.
- Esteem: Leaders D, F, H, and I shared that they worked hard to provide specific recognition and growth feedback to their staff.
- Self-Actualization: Leaders C, F, and I were the most mission driven.

Leaders perceived these layered needs as central to maintaining morale and meaning during prolonged uncertainty.

Theme 5: Bridges' Transition Model (2017)

Several leaders leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate operational changes:

- Endings (letting go): Leaders B, E, J, and K were the most focused on eliminating inefficient systems and quickly addressed obsolete practices. Leaders J and K used the crisis to let go of outdated standardized test practices. Leaders D, H, and I highlighted the loss of in-person routines. Leader G discussed providing constructive feedback and Leader C was firmly anchored in a pre-crisis purpose that positioned this leader's team for direction during chaos.
- Neutral Zone (navigating uncertainty): Leaders D, E, F, H, I, J, and K demonstrated the ability to create a steady workplace experience the created a sense of safety and security.

- New Beginnings: Leaders B, D, E, H, and I launched into the New Beginning with hybrid models, revived outreach, and stabilized work place experiences. They anchored their New Beginnings in guiding their teams through psychological adaptation (Bridges.' 2017).

Leaders perceived these stages as vital to their own and their teams' adaptation, suggesting that psychological readiness for change was a key leadership skill during crisis.

Summary of Cross-case Analyses

The single and cross-case analyses revealed that leaders across the LGU described leadership as an adaptive relational, and meaning-making process. They emphasized Conscientiousness, Openness, and Steadiness as core traits and combined Task, Relational, and Change-Oriented behaviors while demonstrating emotional and psychological dimensions of transition. Through the theoretical lenses of Bridges' Transition Model (2017), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011), and Kübler-Ross, (1969) this chapter illustrated how leaders navigated Endings, guided their teams through the uncertainty of the Neutral Zone, and created a New Beginning in response to crisis. Collectively, their narratives provide insight into how higher education leaders perceived effective adaptation, relational trust, and organizational learning during unprecedented disruption.

The leaders in this study were resilient. They navigated the complexities from COVID-19 with skill by being clear with work assignments (Task-Orientation), intentional interactions (Relational-Orientation), and launching into the New Beginning with workplace improvements and innovations (Change-Orientation) (DeRue et al., 2011). Their ability to navigate the pandemic were firmly rooted in Conscientiousness and Openness (Judge et al., 2002) and these

two traits allowed them to help their teams make sense of the confusion from the crisis (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Many of the leaders were able to provide their teams with clarity and human care during challenging times (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; DeRue et al., 2002; Maslow, 1943).

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter Five brings together the findings from Chapter Four and places them in the framework that guided this study: Bridges' Transition Model (2017), Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002), and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011). It draws on Frankl's (1946) research around creating meaning and purpose from crisis and Eger's (2017) work on psychological freedom through choice. Together, these perspectives help explain how higher-education leaders at one large western LGU guided their teams through the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic tested these leaders' ability to endure hardship and navigate changes in organizational standard operations of procedure.

The discussion blends theory, data, and narrative to paint a picture of effective leadership when everything familiar is falling apart. The findings reveal that the most successful leaders balanced purpose and process, clarity and compassion, and structure and flexibility. They understood that in a crisis, leadership is not about having all the answers, but rather it is about creating conditions in which people can adapt, stay connected, and rediscover meaning in their work. Many of these leaders found that one of the key parts of leadership during a crisis is taking care of their well-being and the needs of their teams (Maslow, 1943).

Reflecting on history reinforces these findings. Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition parallels some of the key findings from this research study. When his ship became trapped in Antarctic ice, Shackleton's original mission of crossing the continent ended overnight. However, he was able to pivot and redefine a successful mission. He shifted the team's purpose from exploration and guided them through survival. He established routines, delegated roles, and kept morale high despite the harsh conditions. Shackleton encompasses what practitioners like Bridges' Transition Model (2017)

and scholars like Frankl (1946) describe as facing uncertainty with purpose and meaning. They set a new “North Star” and made sure their teams could see it, even in the midst of fog.

In contrast, the 1994 Storm King Mountain Fire highlights what happens when leadership collapses. In this case study, firefighters faced unclear communication, competing command structures, and a culture that discouraged speaking up. When the wind shifted, some hesitated to drop their gear and clung to training and habits even amidst the flames. The tragedy highlights the idea that during crisis, silence and ambiguity are as dangerous as the fire itself. Leaders must create environments where people can question, clarify, and act with shared understanding (Harvard Business School Press, 2004).

A similar scenario played out at the LGU during the COVID-19 transition. Leaders who set clear expectations, communicated openly, and aided individuals on teams in psychologically adapting through the transition were able to move their teams through the disorientation of the pandemic toward stability and innovation. Maslow’s (1943) framework emphasizes that physiological needs, safety, security, and belonging are fundamental needs for individuals. Leaders who recognized the significance of ensuring that their teams had what they needed during the crisis (i.e. internet, food, stability etc.) and checked in on their teams’ well-being before productivity helped their teams regain esteem and purpose. The Kübler-Ross Model (1969) supports the idea that many of these leaders normalized grief and fatigue as parts of transition. They paved the way for acceptance and renewed engagement. They guided their teams through Bridges’ Transition Model (2017) three phases of change (i.e. Endings, the Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings) and supported their teams with empathy and meaning (Egar, 2017; Frankl, 1946).

This research study reinforces what both Judge et al., (2002) and DeRue et al., (2011) emphasize in their meta-analyses that leadership depends on traits and behaviors. Traits like

Conscientiousness and Openness help leaders stay grounded and innovative, while behaviors like clear communication, trust-building, and adaptive decision-making turn those traits into action. In other words, who a leader is matters, but what they do with who they are matters even more.

The following chapter connects these insights to a broader question: What does it mean to lead with purpose when the path ahead is uncertain? Drawing from the data and the wisdom of leaders from the case studies, the discussion identifies the mindsets and methods that enable leaders not only to survive crisis but to help others grow through it.

Understanding Leadership Responses in a Unique Type of Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic differed from other crises in higher education because it combined several unprecedented characteristics: (1) extreme isolation, (2) rapid onset and uncertainty, (3) global scale and duration, and (4) disruption of basic human and institutional needs. Unlike a political or localized event, this crisis unfolded across professional, academic, and personal spaces without a clear endpoint or entity to hold responsible. Many leaders described this experience as building the plane while they were flying it, emphasizing that familiar structures vanished overnight. These unique aspects to the pandemic highlight the complexity of the leaders' responses. As a result, this study adds to the literature on crisis leadership in higher education in a unique manner.

Purpose Over Panic

This section addresses Research Question 1a- How did these leader perceive their responses during this crisis?

Overall, leaders perceived their responses as adaptive and purpose-driven rather than reactionary. Many of the leaders mentioned centering their decisions on mission while maintaining trust and meeting human needs before productivity. This aligns with Maslow's (1943) framework,

which emphasized that physiological and safety needs must be met before higher levels of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization can occur.

When crises occur, leadership is tested not by procedure but by purpose. The COVID-19 pandemic tested higher education and pushed institutions beyond familiar standard operational procedures toward finding direction amid disruption. The findings from this study indicate that the most effective leaders did not respond with panic or control, but rather with clarity, empathy, meaning, and action. Prior to the pandemic, collaboration was emphasized, but during the crisis many leaders shared that their teams wanted decisive action. Leaders who made decisions that were purpose-driven and mission-focused rather than fear-based embodied what Frankl (1946) described as the human drive for meaning, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a sense of purpose even under extreme pressure.

Twerski (2012) captured this idea as well in a lobster analogy. As a lobster grows, its rigid shell becomes constrained; to grow, they must retreat beneath rocks, shed the shell, and form a new one. The stimulus for growth, Twerski notes, is discomfort. If lobsters had access to a comfortable situation they would never grow. In a similar manner, leaders evolve only when conditions force them to shed protective habits and build new abilities. The academic leaders in this study experienced the pandemic as a shedding zone where they were uncomfortable, uncertain about the future, but it was necessary for transformation. The key is not to resist the pressure and instead use it as a time for growth. This ties into Bridges' Transition Model (2017) of the Neutral Zone that is a time of psychological adaptation that is necessary to step into the New Beginning.

This study outlines the three stages under the Transition umbrella that Bridges' Transition Model (2017) outlines. Each of the phases (i.e. Endings, the Neutral Zone, and New Beginning) require different mindsets and psychological approaches. During the pandemic leaders navigated the

Ending of established standard operational procedures and identities and entered the Neutral Zone that is filled with ambiguity. Prior to the pandemic leaders had a clear path and approach. However, several leaders discussed that they felt like they were required to build the plane as they were flying it during COVID-19. Leaders who embraced the ambiguity and leaned into discomfort seemed to navigate the shifting landscape more effectively than most. Their actions align with Maslow's (1943) research that highlights the importance of physiological needs, security and safety first, rebuilding belonging through connection, and ultimately achieving esteem and self-actualization through purpose-driven work.

Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic required composure, flexibility, and compassion that was challenging to achieve amidst a global crisis. The findings of this study suggest that effective leadership in crisis requires one to regulate their interior emotions to create emotional stability for their teams. Leaders who remained centered balanced physiological needs, had the ability to make meaning from hardship, and leaned into relational empathy.

Frankl's (1946) logotherapy suggests that translating hardship into meaning allows individuals to shift from loss to purpose. Leaders who viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to realign values reported less exhaustion and higher motivation among teams. For example, one participant described how the pandemic clarified the importance of family time and taking care of employees. This touches on a concept that Eger (2017) asserted that freedom lies in choosing one's attitude regardless of circumstances.

In a crisis, many leaders' reflexes are to react. Great leaders resist that reflex. As Frankl (1946) highlights in his research, even when circumstances are harsh, one can always choose how to respond. The leaders in this study did exactly that. COVID-19 forced immediate pivots, but the most

effective leaders paired action with intention. They slowed down just enough to act with purpose instead of panic. They communicated early, named the loss, and framed the path forward.

Bridges' Transition Model (2017) helps to explain why that pause matters. The Neutral Zone is the messy middle between Endings and New Beginnings. It is not a detour. It is a time of intense work. Leaders who acknowledged disorientation gave their teams time to grieve what was lost and energy to consider what might come next (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969). In practice, that looked like simple and steady actionable steps. These leaders provided predictable updates, clarified roles, and set attainable goals to reduce teams from feeling cognitive overload while everyone found their footing.

Eger's (2017) language for this is "the choice" to interpret hardship. Leaders who reframed adversity as meaning-making and not failure guided their teams forward. These data showed three recurring actionable steps: (1) Transparent communication even when information was incomplete, (2) Empathy before execution (i.e. validating fear, fatigue, or frustration before reassigning work), and (3) Reframing hardships (i.e. finding ways to make meaning from setbacks).

These strategies and tools turned fear into focus. Leaders were able to help individuals on teams move toward acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969) and up Maslow's (1943) ladder by restoring safety and rebuilding belonging and esteem. The findings from this study align with Trait and Behavior Theory (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016). Leaders who were high in Conscientiousness (i.e. follow-through, structure) and Openness (i.e. trying new tools, redesigning events) were best positioned to steady the work and invite innovation (Judge et al., 2002). However, traits were not enough on their own. DeRue et al. (2011) emphasized it is what leaders did with those traits. Leaders who blended tasks (i.e. clear process), relational (i.e. check-ins, recognition), and

change-oriented behaviors (i.e. pivots and new Standard Operational Procedures) were able to propel their teams forward.

Meaning-making leadership does not avoid the crisis, it creates a manageable narrative around the crisis. Leaders who combined truthful communication with steady structure and celebrated small wins helped people navigate loss and engage with work with purpose. They guided their teams through panic and recentered them around manageable progress (Frankl, 1946; Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Psychological Adaptation and the Brain Science of Leadership

This section addresses Research Question 1b- How did these leaders perceive their influence on the capacity of their teams to perform effectively during this crisis?

Leaders perceived their influence not as control over outcomes but as creating conditions for teams to feel stability and trust. Many emphasized that predictable communication, empathy, and visibility helped maintain a sense of equilibrium. The interviews from this study highlighted leaders who found crises challenging and had to lean into increased communication and balance that with competing institutional priorities while still making time for caring for the individuals on their teams. Many of the leaders learned to stabilize teams through transparency, predictable communication, and compassion. They recognized that calm is key and that psychological safety is a critical component of organizational stability (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Maslow, 1943).

Cognitively, these leaders' actions align with neuroscience research. Recent research is delving into the role that the anterior mid-cingulate cortex plays in motivation, emotional regulation, and decision-making under pressure. These are all components to effective leadership, especially in times of crisis. Similarly to how Frankl (1946) found that individuals who found purpose amidst pain were able to navigate the most challenging times, this recent research highlights that the anterior

mid-cingulate cortex is the region of the brain that is responsible for behavior that moves individuals toward goals despite adversity (Huberman, 2021; Shackman et al., 2011). It is described as the brain's "willpower hub," and is responsible for activating when individuals encounter challenging times, conflicts, uncertainty, or pain; when they persist, this region of the brain grows stronger. This region of the brain is responsible for helping leaders navigate stress by learning to take challenging situations and turning them into purposeful action even if they are very difficult times. This neural pathway aligns with psychological models such as Duckworth's (2016) research about grit and Dweck's (2006) growth mindset research as well as Frankl's (1946) research about turning painful experiences into purposeful actions. Bridges' Transition Model (2017) highlights similar concepts where leaders must tolerate discomfort in the Neutral Zone to reach New Beginnings. This is what Maslow (1943) would call self-actualization, where persistence through struggle leads to reaching a greater understanding of self and circumstances. While this study does not delve into this topic of brain science, it brushes up against the themes and it would be interesting to complete follow-up research that leans into the science of leadership more.

Trait and Behavior Theory

This section addresses Research Question 2 – How did these leader's traits, behaviors, and approaches shift or remain consistent throughout the crisis and transition?

The findings constructed from this study reinforce that traits alone did not define leadership during the pandemic; instead, as DeRue et al., (2011) and Judge et al., (2002) suggest, the integration of traits and behaviors was the key determinant of effectiveness.

Across all leaders, several shared traits and behaviors consistently emerged. Most demonstrated high Conscientiousness, showing reliability, accountability, and strong follow-through. Openness was evident as leaders encouraged innovation during the crisis, with many redesigning

systems or implementing hybrid models. Agreeableness appeared through empathy and servant leadership; while often underestimated, research shows that Agreeable leaders were more productive. Leaders also displayed low Neuroticism, maintaining emotional steadiness that built trust, and Extraversion, as those who remained visible and proactive helped stabilize their teams during uncertainty. In terms of behaviors, leaders balanced three key orientations: Task-Oriented behaviors such as setting clear expectations and executing logistics; Relational-Oriented behaviors focused on empathy, feedback, and recognition; and Change-Oriented behaviors that supported innovation and problem solving. While most leaders integrated all three orientations, some emphasized specific behaviors based on the challenges that they faced.

The Kübler-Ross Model (1969)

The emotional progression described by leaders aligns with the Kübler-Ross Model (1969). Initially, many leaders and individuals on teams experienced denial which was followed by frustration when uncertainty persisted. Bargaining appeared as attempts to replicate pre-pandemic norms (i.e. we'll be back by fall), while depression took the form of fatigue and disengagement. However, those who reached acceptance helped their teams do the same and were able to re-engage in purposeful work. The most effective leaders validated emotions without being impacted by them. They normalized uncertainty and shifted focus toward resilience (Egar, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Leaders implemented several practical strategies to support their teams during the crisis. They often began meetings by acknowledging challenges, helping employees let go of what was ending. Many created open forums for questions and uncertainty, giving space for dialogue and adjustment during the Neutral Zone. Finally, leaders celebrated milestones and lessons learned, marking the start of New Beginnings and reinforcing progress. These strategies align with Bridges'

Transition Model (2017), highlighting that emotional processing and psychological adaptation are essential components of successful organizational change.

Lessons in Resilience from Shackleton, Lincoln, and Washington

Adaptivity: Shackleton's Endurance expedition (Giannantonio and Hurley-Handson, 2016; Lansing, 2014) offers a blueprint for leaders under pressure. He focused not on controlling the uncontrollable but on maintaining morale and unity. Similarly, LGU leaders who focused on empathy, compassion, and well-being over task completion during peak uncertainty sustained their teams more effectively through the crisis. Shackleton's principle that by endurance we conquer rings true still today.

Systems: Lincoln's Morrill Act (1862) laid the foundation for LGUs. He balanced the national crisis with long-term systemic change. The LGU leaders who used this approach maintained operational continuity while redesigning admissions and recruitment systems. They demonstrated that purpose-driven structure can emerge from chaos.

Excellence: Washington's early hardships forged his focus on diligence, discipline, and relational mentorship. Like Washington, the LGU leaders exemplified excellence, doing more with less, leading through service rather than authority. His "burlap shirt" story symbolizes the humility and perseverance evident among leaders who figuratively speaking wore the "burlap" of hardship for their teams during the pandemic.

These historical figures reinforce that adaptability, systems thinking, and character are important components of success during a crisis.

Integration of Frameworks

The Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Bridges' Transition Model (2017), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) highlight a critical human-centered aspect of leadership. Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs (1943) work shows that when basic needs such as safety, security, and belonging go unmet, trust and performance suffer. Kübler-Ross (1969) offers insight into the emotional turbulence people experience during times of crisis, while Bridges's Transition Model (2017) provides a model for navigating transitions, particularly amid uncertainty. At the large western LGU, leaders who blended these frameworks were better able to embrace change and guide their teams through psychological adaptation. Their most effective tools included regular communication rhythms to reinforce safety, empathy-driven supervision that acknowledged grief and fatigue, and small wins that rebuilt esteem and a sense of progress. These strategies reflect Eger's (2017) concept of freedom through choice and Frankl's (1946) belief in transforming hardship into meaning.

Continued Discussion of Strategies and Tools for Crisis Leadership

This section addresses Research Question 3- How do these data inform tools and strategies that leaders can use to support individuals and teams during organizational transitions?

Synthesizing all of these findings, this study identified seven actionable strategies for leaders navigating transitions:

1. Propose Purpose Early: Begin every change with "why." When leaders provide context and direction during shifts and changes within institutional mission, anxiety decreases, and engagement increases.
2. Normalize Uncertainty: Treat ambiguity as a shared space, not a leadership failure.
3. Prioritize Psychological Safety: Before new policies, ensure people feel seen, heard, and safe.
4. Communicate Predictably: Routine communication restores rhythm and trust in unstable contexts.

5. Balance Task, Relationships, and Change: Structure without empathy can lead to burnout and empathy without structure leads to chaos.
6. Encourage Reflective Practice: Journal, debrief, and invite feedback to recognize growth through discomfort.
7. Celebrate progress: Recognition satisfies esteem needs (Maslow, 1943) and signals the start of a New Beginning (Bridges', 2017).

These tools can serve as an adaptive leadership model for future crises in higher education.

Implications for Leadership Development

The implications of this research extend beyond crisis response to the intentional cultivation of leadership that builds a strong working environment. Institutions navigating challenging times can take several actionable steps: embed psychological transition training within leadership programs, teach frameworks of grief and adaptation alongside strategic management, reframe failure as experienced by rewarding learning from mistakes to normalize innovation, and encourage narrative-based reflection, using storytelling as a means of meaning making (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Eger, 2017; Frankl, 1946). While crisis reveals character, preparation shapes it. Effective leadership development must merge the science of behavior with the art of empathy.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by data loss due to technological failures and post-pandemic participant turnover. Future research could replicate this design across multiple institutions, comparing how organizational culture impacts psychological adaptation. Additionally, it could be useful and informative to explore the neuroscience of leadership under stress. A future study could expand on the ideas in this paper to examine how leaders can train self-regulation (i.e. mindfulness, breathwork) to optimize the anterior mid-cingulate cortex and stabilize emotions. It would also be

interesting to create a longitudinal study to examine whether leaders who employ meaning-based frameworks (Bridges, 2017; Eger, 2017; Frankl, 1946) are able to increase engagement with their teams post-crisis.

Conclusion

The heart of leadership during a crisis lies in the Neutral Zone. That uncertain space between what was and what will be. It is in this in-between that character, resilience, and innovation are forged. Leaders at the LGU demonstrated that effective leadership during a crisis is about empathy and compassion. Leaders who were able to pause, listen, and act with clarity during chaos were more likely to succeed. This aligned with Bridges' Transition Model (2017) that emphasized the ability to accompany people psychologically through endings, uncertainty, and renewal.

Crisis leadership can be understood through a few central ideas. Frankl (1946) emphasized the importance of meaning-making and finding purpose in the midst of hardship as a way to endure and grow. Eger (2017) expanded on this through the concept of psychological freedom, reminding leaders that true strength lies in choosing one's response rather than reacting impulsively to adversity. Finally, DeRue et al (2011) and Judge et al., (2002) highlighted the essential balance between traits and behaviors in effective leadership. While traits may predict who steps into leadership, it is behaviors that determine how leadership is enacted and sustained in times of crisis.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a valuable framework for understanding what teams require to function effectively, especially during periods of change or stress. At the most basic level, psychological needs involve ensuring that individuals have food, water, and shelter. Safety and security come next and are achieved through clear protocols, defined roles, and consistent communication that create predictability in the environment. As teams stabilize, leaders can nurture belonging by promoting connection through regular check-ins, meetings, and peer support. Building

esteem involves publicly recognizing accomplishments where appropriate and offering constructive, growth-oriented feedback. Finally, at the level of self-actualization, leaders can provide opportunities for meaning, mission driven projects that allow individuals to contribute their highest potential and feel purpose in their work.

Leaders can use tools like the Kübler-Ross Model (1969) to support individuals on teams. In the stage of denial, leaders can help by calmly sharing facts and setting short, attainable goals to restore a sense of control. When anger arises, effective leaders listen without defensiveness, acknowledge the loss being experienced, and redirect the emotional energy into purposeful action. During bargaining, leaders can provide clarity by distinguishing between what is flexible and what is non-negotiable, helping teams regain focus and stability. In periods of depression, leaders can lighten workloads, increase communication, and reconnect individuals to the broader mission to rebuild motivation. Finally, at the stage of acceptance, leaders can redefine standard operating procedures, celebrate progress, and encourage reflection, guiding their teams toward renewed purpose and forward momentum.

Additionally, leaders can use the Bridges' Transition Model (2017) to help individuals on teams understand what change is, and how to learn from it. In the stage of Ending and Letting Go, leaders should acknowledge what has ended, take time to reflect on past practices, and clearly communicate the reasons behind the change to help individuals release what they once knew to be normal. During the Neutral Zone, leaders can normalize ambiguity by reassuring teams that uncertainty is a natural part of transition, while setting attainable goals and creating a sense of forward movement. Finally, in the stage of New Beginning, leaders should articulate a clear vision, outline new standard operation procedures, and recognize the adoption of new practices.

As higher education continues to face demographic shifts, technological change, and global uncertainty, the findings of this study offer a compass. The leaders who will shape the future are not those who avoid discomfort but those who transform it. These leaders can shed old practices and guide others through challenging times and emerge renewed. The transition never ends; it evolves. The task of leadership is to walk with others through that evolution with purpose over panic and with meaning over fear.

This research study explored higher education leadership before, during, and after an unparalleled global crisis. By delving into the lived experiences of leaders at an LGU during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study provides insights into the dynamic shifts in leadership strategies, the pivotal roles played by higher education leaders, and the essential traits and behaviors that facilitated effective crisis management and organizational resilience. The integration of Bridges' Transition Model (2017), the Kübler-Ross Model (1969), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and Trait and Behavior Theories (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002; Northouse, 2016) offered a comprehensive framework to analyze how leaders navigated the complex phases of Ending, Transition, and New Beginning, highlighting the psychological and emotional adaptations required to navigate challenging times.

Moreover, the research illuminates the importance of leaders' ability to balance empathy with decisive action, the importance of communication during times of uncertainty, and the need for a supportive and adaptive leadership approach that aligns with the evolving needs of their teams. This was particularly evident in the way leaders managed the shift from traditional operational modalities to crisis-induced innovations, ensuring both continuity in education and the well-being of the community (DeRue et al., 2011; Leybourne, 2016; Marinoni et al., 2020).

The cross-case analysis revealed consistent themes across different leadership narratives, demonstrating that despite varying personal leadership styles, the core competencies of adaptability, empathy, and strategic foresight were universally valued (Braun & Clarke, 2006; DeRue et al., 2011; Eger, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Judge et al., 2002; Yin, 2018). These traits and behaviors not only helped mitigate the immediate impacts of the crisis but also positioned the institution to emerge stronger, more cohesive, and more innovative.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a real-time analysis of leadership during a global health crisis, offering practical insights and strategies that can be employed in future crises. It bridges the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical application, contributing to the literature on higher education leadership and crisis management.

As this research aligns with the mission of advancing leadership understanding in times of significant disruption, it calls for ongoing exploration into how institutions can foster these essential leadership qualities. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of crisis-driven leadership changes and how these can inform more resilient and adaptive leadership practices in higher education.

In conclusion, this doctoral research has not only highlighted the complexities and challenges of leading during a crisis but has also celebrated the potential for growth, innovation, and strengthened community bonds that can arise from effectively navigating such challenges (Bridges & Bridges, 2017; Kübler-Ross, 1969). As leaders and institutions continue to face both known and unforeseen challenges, the insights from this study provide a valuable compass for guiding their journey through crisis and beyond, ensuring that they are equipped to support their communities and advance their educational missions with integrity and resilience.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT LETTER BASIC TEMPLATE

_____,

I am gathering data for one of my Ph.D. research projects this semester. _____ Admissions is one of the best work environments that I've experienced and I'm curious to know more about what your leadership team is doing right!

My paper will focus on the thinking (ideas) and behavior (actions) of _____ Admissions Leadership Team. I am studying how these two factors impact the way that leaders build trust & facilitate productivity in the workplace.

Are you available next week or the following week for a 30-40 minute interview?

Thank you for your time & consideration!

~Jessica

P.S. I'm happy to share the completed research paper with your team at the end of the semester.

JESSICA RENCHER, M.ED.
Admissions Events Coordinator

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Cover Statement:

First of all, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview as a part of my doctoral research, I'm studying how leaders in higher education responded to COVID-19 and how their approaches influenced the team dynamics and performance. This interview is a key component of my dissertation and may contribute to broader insights on leadership in times of crisis. Before we begin, I want to go over a few important points in line with research guidelines. Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You have the right to skip any questions or stop the interview at any point without needing to explain. Additionally, after our conversation, if you prefer that a portion of the interview or the entire interview is not used please let me know and I'll honor the request and then to help accurately capture the discussion, I'd like to record it and transcribe it. It will only be used for research purposes and names are going to be removed from all the findings. So, your name and your identity will be confidential. Do I have your permission to proceed and record our conversation?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your path into leadership? In other words, what is your story?
2. Are you a natural leader or do you work to be a leader?
3. What is your primary purpose for being in leadership? How do you convey your LGU's mission to your team?
4. Describe three characteristics of a strong leader.
5. You do a lot of meaningful work creating an environment of inclusivity on campus. Tell me more about your team and the work you are doing here at your LGU?
6. How are successes shared on your team? How are failures addressed? How are conflicts resolved?
7. This is my first year in my program, so I am a new researcher and am learning how to develop informative questions. Is there anything else you would like to share about your thinking (ideas) and behavior (actions) within your leadership role at your LGU that I missed? In other words, what is your secret sauce?!

Optional: Would you like to share your Top Five Strengths Finder Results?