

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS: A STUDY OF THE FAILURE RATE OF CAREER  
PROGRESSION DUE TO INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR VERSUS PEOPLE  
LEADERSHIP MINDSETS IN POST-RECESSIONARY SOUTHEAST  
TENNESSEE AND NORTHWEST GEORGIA

by

Michael Lance Starks

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

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Liberty University, School of Business

August 2019

## Abstract

Despite the efforts of many leadership development programs, more than 80% of new leaders transitioning into the first role as a leader fail to make a successful transition (Korn Ferry Leadership Principles, 2018). This paper studied a leader's failure to shift his or her thinking and behaviors from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset. This research is suggesting that organizations adopt two tools to improve leadership transition effectiveness: Leadership Transition Readiness Assessment, and Start, Stop, Change, and Transition questionnaire.

*Key words:* leadership transition, individual contributor mindset, people leader mindset, leadership development programs, career transition

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Scott Maltzie, PhD

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Edward Moore, PhD

## Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my wife, Anna. Her love and advice helped me (us) reach this milestone in our life. My wife challenges me every day to be a better husband, Father, and follower of Christ.

## Acknowledgements

In addition to my wife, Anna, I want to acknowledge the support and understanding of my son Will and daughter Lily. I also want to thank and acknowledge my parents, Lloyd and Lynn, for giving me my first opportunities to learn and grow.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

### **Background of the Problem**

According to Gallagher (2017), there is no shortage of leadership advice. In fact, in the United States alone, leadership development is a \$24 billion industry (Ashkenas & Hausmann, 2016). This is an industry, according to Gallagher (2017) that has failed leaders, organizations, and many communities. The Global Leadership Forecast (2018) survey found that the top two concerns for executives is the development of leaders and the failure to attract and retain high-potential talent. It is becoming more apparent that leadership development programs are not working. The gap between leadership development programs and successful leadership is an issue that has existed for many years. The impact of poor leadership development is all the more evident in failed leadership transitions, career promotions, and career progressions. Despite the efforts of many leadership development programs, more than 80% of new leaders transitioning into the first role as a leader fail to make a successful transition (Korn Ferry Leadership Principles, 2018).

Today's workplace is changing at a greater pace than in previous times due to the delayed retirement of Baby Boomers, the small number of Generation X workers, and the numerous Millennials and post-Millennial's required to lead others at an earlier time in their career than previous generations. According to Fry (2018), in 2016 Millennials became the largest generation in the workforce. The verdict is still out whether Millennials, as they advance in their careers towards leadership positions, will be successful or not (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). Research is also beginning to shed light on the forgotten Generation X. The research regarding the tension between the Baby Boomer generation and the Millennial generation is well documented. However, Barry (2017) cited that the Generation X manager is perceived as the

most capable manager. Barry (2017) went on to say that executives should place more trust in Generation X managers.

Today's emerging leaders are struggling to make an impact when transitioning to new roles. Emerging leaders are required to move faster, communicate more, assimilate to new technology with precision, and progress in their careers sooner than the generation before them (Ehrlich, 2017). As such, the importance of this study to the field of leadership and more specifically the field of career progressions could be significant to better understand the growing failure of leadership transitions. One way to better understand the growing failure of leadership transitions is to research the impact of emerging leaders who make the shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leadership mindset. There is a gap in the study of leadership transitions as it relates to an individual contributor mindset versus a people leadership mindset. Manderscheid and Freeman (2012) found that despite the glaring importance of leadership transitions, the research to correctly facilitate leadership transitions is lacking. According to Spears (2018), "leadership transitions are a high-stakes game" (p. 344).

### **Problem Statement**

According to Custovic and Insaurralde (2016), while many employees have been successful as individual leaders, many struggle in roles where they are required to lead others. The general problem to be addressed is the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with promotions and career progressions which result in lower employee engagement and lower team performance. Keller and Meany (2017) found that 75% of newly promoted leaders report being unprepared for the new assignment. McKeown (2015) found that the failure rate of newly promoted or hired leaders is 40%.

The specific problem to be addressed is that a leader's failure to shift his or her thinking and behaviors from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset could be a contributor to the high rate of leadership failure in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations in Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia, two regions emerging from the impact of The Great Recession of 2008. According to Adams (2017), since the recession, many boards have focused less on executive transitions and leadership development. Tiffan (2009) found that individual contributors achieve success through a mindset that thrives on individual drive and effort. On the other hand, Dawson (2016), found a people leader is recognized for his or her ability to create an atmosphere that motivates team members to succeed.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study will add to the body of knowledge regarding leadership transitions by identify the factors present when leadership transitions fail due to an individual contributor mindset versus a people leader mindset. The study also explored the impact to organizational and team performance resulting from effective and ineffective leadership transitions. This phenomenon was explored through in-depth interviews with for-profit and nonprofit leaders located in the recession hit region of Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia. This area of the United States has been greatly impacted by The Great Recession of 2008. Dalton, Georgia, in Northwest Georgia, had an average unemployment rate of 4.5% in 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). In 2009, the average unemployment rate reached 12.8%. In 2017, the unemployment rate in Dalton, Georgia improved to 5.7%. Chattanooga, Tennessee, in Southeast Tennessee, had an average unemployment rate of 4.1% in 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). In 2009, the average unemployment rate reached 9.5%. In 2017, the unemployment rate in Chattanooga,

Tennessee improved to 3.9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). These two areas have experienced significant hardship and are gradually emerging from The Great Recession. The ability to have successful leadership transitions, career progressions, and career promotions in these areas is pivotal to the future economic development of the region as many Baby Boomers can now afford to retire as the economy in these areas has improved making way for a new generation of leaders.

Many organizations are experiencing a gap in leadership pipelines due to the lingering effects of The Great Recession where older workers stayed in the workplace longer than in previous time periods. As these workers stayed in jobs longer than in other time periods, the promise of promotions and career progressions was lost on a large population of workers. This phenomenon, coupled with low budgets for leadership development programs, has created a scenario today where emerging leaders are less prepared to lead.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of the research is a qualitative phenomenological study. A qualitative research method was selected because “at the heart of qualitative research is a central phenomenon we wish to explore” (Creswell, 2016, p. 6). The phenomenon in this study was to explore the factors present when leadership transitions fail focusing on the transition from individual contributor to a people leader. Attributes of a qualitative research method includes gathering multiple perspectives and contrasting different views of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). This study brought together relevant information about leadership transitions which can help drive effective organizational change by accelerating successful leadership transitions and reducing the high failure rate of career progressions.

## **Discussion of Method**

There are different methods that could have been selected for this qualitative research project. First, a qualitative method was selected as opposed to a quantitative method. In comparing and contrasting a qualitative method from a quantitative method, it is important to know the difference in explanation versus understanding, and personal role versus impersonal role (Stake, 2010). According to Stake (2010), important characteristics of a qualitative study include interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic. A qualitative study is field oriented emphasizing observations by participants. To determine the best design method of a qualitative study, various types of design methods were compared and contrasted – ethnographic, case study, and phenomenological.

A qualitative method was chosen over other methods because a qualitative research strategy can best be used to conduct phenomenological research. A phenomenological research method is appropriate to address the problem and purpose of this study. For example, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological design is the experience or the reality of participants as they journey through a phenomenon. Researchers of phenomenological design study the commonality of the experience as participants share a lived reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) describe phenomenology as being closely tied to philosophy. The phenomenological design draws on what the participants have in common (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is appropriate to use a phenomenological design when the researcher seeks to understand what participants are going through. Due to the ongoing challenge with leadership development programs and the high failure rate of leadership transitions, this study will require exploring the topic in more detail and with a greater degree of insight. Other qualitative methods were not selected for this study for multiple reasons. Grounded theory research or a narrative is

a narrowly focused study typically on one individual where as a phenomenological study is more appropriate for small groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was based on in-depth interviews with up to 10 leaders in the Northwest Georgia and Southeast Tennessee region. According to Rawat (2016), there are certain guidelines for in-depth interviews associated with phenomenological research. The interview guidelines include acknowledging that neither the participant nor the researcher fully know where the interview will lead (Rawat, 2016). The focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but to understand how the participants experience the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016).

### **Discussion of Design**

According to a study by Prion and Adamson (2014), qualitative research design requires a structured approach to data gathering that creates an auditable process. Interviewing was the main tool to research the impact to an organization when an individual has not effectively transitioned from the mindset of an individual contributor to the mindset of a people leader. To collect data in a phenomenological study, the researcher will interview the people who are experiencing the reality, concept, or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to understand what has been experienced and how the participants in the study have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Groenewald (2004), “the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (p. 44). The interview stage of this phenomenological research is specifically designed not to be leading, but to discover with the participant where the interview will lead (Rawat, 2016).

## **Summary of the Nature of the Study**

In this phenomenological study, the phenomenon of leadership transition failures were explored by interviewing up to 10 individuals to gain an in-depth understanding of career progressions and promotions specifically related to an individual contributor mindset compared to a people leadership mindset. This study was isolated to the post-recessionary areas of Northwest Georgia and Southeast Tennessee. This area was studied due to the high unemployment that occurred during the recession. As these areas continue to emerge from The Great Recession, successful leadership transitions will be important for the future of the economic strength of this region of the United States.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions are important to understand the problem statement. To better understand leadership transition failures due to an individual contributor mindset and a people leader mindset it will be important to research both areas in detail. This research explored the behaviors of an individual contributor in a leadership role compared to the behaviors of a people leader in a leadership role in an attempt to add to the body of knowledge surrounding what is needed to be successful in leadership transitions, career progressions, and career promotions.

This study explored the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the impact to organizational effectiveness and performance when an individual in a people leadership role performs as an individual contributor?

RQ2. What are the critical success factors of individuals transitioning from individual contributor to people leader?

RQ3. What are common failures for individual contributors transitioning to become a people leader?

RQ4. What are the characteristics of a successful individual contributor? What are the characteristics of a successful people leader?

### **Conceptual Framework**

There are five concepts, themes, or perceptions that provided the foundation for this research. Each concept supports that specific problem statement and research questions.

### **Failure of Leadership Development Programs**

The research suggest that leadership development programs are failing to achieve the objectives and goals of many organizations (Gallagher, 2017). These objectives are specifically designed to prepare current and future leaders for career promotions. Leadership development is an area that receives less funding during tough economic times. A specific concept to further explore during the literature review is the failure of leadership development programs.

### **Career Progression of Generation X and Millennials**

The research suggests that delaying the retirement of Baby Boomers has created a leadership gap for Generation X and Millennials (Eubanks, 2017). The research also suggests the over-emphasis of Millennials has further created a leadership gap. The career progression of Generation X and Millennials will be further explored in the literature review.

### **New Role Impact (Failure of Leadership Transitions)**

The research questions specifically addressed the failure of leadership transitions. The research suggest that promoted leaders fail to make a timely impact in their new role (Keller & Meany, 2017). The literature review further explored the idea of new role impact during career progressions.

## Individual Contributor vs. People Leader

The core focus of this study was to further explore the idea that a significant contribution to failed leadership transitions is the inability to shift ones thinking from an individual contributor to a people leader (Custovic & Insaurrealde, 2016). This paper answered the research questions specific to individual contributor and people leader in the leadership transition timeframe.

## Economic Cycles and Leadership Development

The final concept explored the impact of recessionary time periods on leadership development programs specific to leadership transition readiness (Putta, 2014). The idea is that organizations, after The Great Recession of 2008, are even worse prepared for leadership transitions today than they realize. The research and literature review investigated the connection between leadership transition success, individual contributor, people leader, and economic cycles in detail.

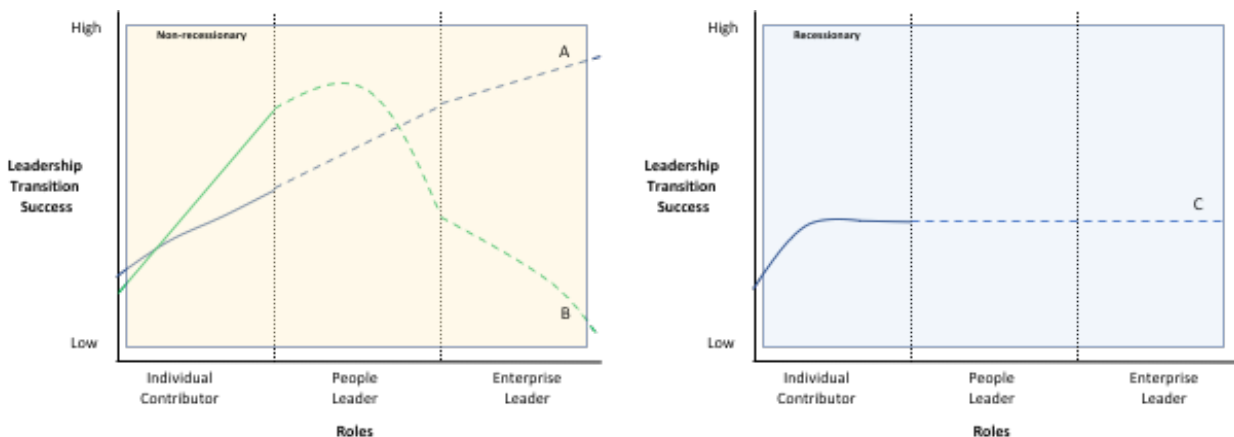


Figure 1. Leadership transitions

## Discussion of Relationships between Concepts

As reflected in Figure 1, leadership transitions, the relationship between leadership transition success, individual contributor success, people leadership success in both recessionary

and non-recessionary time periods can be described in three career progressions (Career Progression A, B, and C). Career Progression A is the ideal path from a successful individual contributor to a successful people leader and ultimately an enterprise leader. Career Progression B shows the impact of a successful individual contributor who failed to make the transition to a people leader. Career Progression B is designed to show the lack of training and development that occurs during recessionary time periods and how leadership transition failure is amplified.

**Summary of the conceptual framework.** The rationale behind the conceptual framework for this study is to integrate the leadership transition process from individual contributor to people leader. An individual with high leadership transition success can move from individual contributor to people leader in a progression. This is similar to the idea of someone with high emotional intelligence or EQ. The idea behind the conceptual framework is that individuals need to develop a high leadership transition intelligence. Individuals need to understand and act upon the principles of leadership transitions to be successful.

The goal of this research is to discover information that can help organizations successfully transition leaders into key impact roles. The failure of leadership development programs, the delayed retirement of Baby Boomers, the individual contributor mindset, and recessionary times all negatively contribute to failed leadership transitions.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were defined relative to their use in this research:

*Individual contributor role:* According to Tiffan (2009), the accomplishments of an individual contributor are mostly based on his or her own drive or effort operating either in a team or independently.

*Leadership mindset:* According to Taylor (2014), leadership mindset is centered around who you are, your leadership style and your interaction with your team—attitudes, beliefs and expectations. Taylor (2014) further defines a leader’s mindset as: an internal drive to lead, ownership of everything (if I fail, the team fails), a desire to be the best, and an ability to see around the corner.

*People leader role:* Dawson (2016) defined a people leader role as the capability to act in a way that has a positive influence of the lives of others. Dawson (2016) found the following attributes characterize a strong people leader: provide and create an atmosphere that people thrive in, an atmosphere that leverages one another’s strengths, and takes time to get to know people to effectively lead.

*The Great Recession:* According to The Economic Policy Institute (October 14, 2018), the Great Recession is defined as follows:

The Great Recession—which officially lasted from December 2007 to June 2009—began with the bursting of an 8 trillion-dollar housing bubble. The resulting loss of wealth led to sharp cutbacks in consumer spending. This loss of consumption, combined with the financial market chaos triggered by the bursting of the bubble, also led to a collapse in business investment. As consumer spending and business investment dried up, massive job loss followed. In 2008 and 2009, the U.S. labor market lost 8.4 million jobs, or 6.1 percent of all payroll employment. This was the most dramatic employment contraction (by far) of any recession since the Great Depression. By comparison, in the deep recession that began in 1981, job loss was 3.1 percent, or only about half as severe.

## **Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations**

**Assumptions.** According to Wargo (2015), assumptions in research reflect what might be presumed to be true or a fact for the research purposes. In this study, the following assumptions were identified. The participants answered the interview questions in an honest and candid manner. The participants had an interest in the study and fully engaged in the conversation. The participants had a sufficient level of experience of the phenomenon being studied. Companies reduced funding of leadership development programs in recessionary times and deemphasized leadership initiatives. Delayed retirements of Baby Boomers impacted the career progression opportunities of many associates.

**Limitations.** Wargo (2015) also found that limitations in research are more than likely the areas of which one has very little control. Limitations may have been weaknesses of the study. An example included a response rate to a survey. The following limitations were identified for this study.

Leadership is a broad field to study. The narrow field of leadership transitions or career progressions could have been a potential weakness. The researcher discussed the leadership topics that related to leadership transitions to share a more complete picture.

This study could be perceived as a statement against successful individual contributors. The leadership topic involving individual contributor impact is research that could stand alone. Some research suggest that the era of an individual contributor is over, while other research suggest there is an on-going need for strong individual contributors.

Other limitations include the number of participants that can yield meaningful in-depth experiences and data. Wargo (2015) found that data saturation is required. Data saturation is reached when no new information can be discovered (Wargo, 2015).

**Delimitations.** An important delimitation of this study includes the geographic area by which participants have been identified. The area of Northwest Georgia and Southwest Tennessee is an area that continues to recover from The Great Recession. And as such, this area has experienced delayed retirements that have contributed to the leadership transition phenomenon.

### **Significance of the Study**

Three significant gaps exist in practice today, and this study is designed to bring attention to each gap, suggest ways to fill each gap, and add to the understanding and effective practice of business today. The gaps include:

1. The lack of leadership development program effectiveness.
2. The high failure rate of leadership transitions.
3. The need for a mindset shift from an individual contributor to a people leader.

**Reduction of gaps.** The first gap relates to the research that leadership development programs are not working. Leaders continue to report that they are unprepared for new roles (Keller & Meany, 2017). This study reviewed the current literature associated with failed leadership development programs and the impact on organizations and people. The study contrasted the impact of recessionary time periods and non-recessionary time periods on leadership development programs. This study attempted to understand this gap in more detail through extensive literature review.

The second gap is research related to the failure of leadership transitions. This is believed to one of the unintended consequences of failed leadership development programs. With a failure rate of 40% or higher, leadership transition is an important gap to address (McKeown, 2015). The literature review explored in detail the research around leadership

transition failure for newly hired or promoted leaders. This study attempted to fill this gap by uncovering specific reasons for leadership transition failure through in-depth interviews and conversations with individuals regarding their real-world experience of this gap.

At the core of this study was the third gap between leadership transitions and the lack of a successful shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leadership mindset. It was proposed in this study that a mindset shift was a key factor in successful leadership transitions. It is believed that this shift is harder to make than organizations anticipate, and as such, more research and discussion is required to better understand the behaviors of a successful people leader.

### **Implications for Biblical Integration**

In 1 Kings 3:1-15 (MSG), the story of Solomon unfolds. After Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, he went to worship and sacrificed a thousand whole-burnt offerings on the altar. That night, after worship, God appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked, "What can I give you?" Solomon's state of mind, at this time, was on the burden of his leadership transition to rule in place of his Father, David. Solomon described his mental state,

And now here I am God, my God, you have made me your servant, ruler of the kingdom in place of David my father. I'm too young for this, a mere child, I don't know the ropes, hardly know the 'ins' and 'outs' of this job. And here I am, set down in the middle of the people you have chosen, a great people—far too many to ever count. (1 Kings 3: 7-8, MSG)

Solomon was concerned about his ability to be a people leader, and he was insecure about the job responsibilities. Solomon's response to God's question is important for leaders to understand.

The mental shift to a people leader can be characterized below when Solomon said,

Here's what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people. God, the Master, was delighted with Solomon's response.

And God said to him,

Because you have asked for this and haven't grasped after a long life, or riches, or the doom of your enemies, but you have asked for the ability to lead and govern well, I'll give you what you've asked for—I'm giving you a wise and mature heart. There's never been one like you before; and there'll be no one after. As a bonus, I'm giving you both the wealth and glory you didn't ask for—there's not a king anywhere who will come up to your mark. And if you stay on course, keeping your eye on the life-map and the God-signs as your father David did, I'll also give you a long life. (1 Kings 3:9, MSG)

As you break down this passage, critical leadership concepts emerge:

1. The importance of listening to effectively lead people.
2. The realization that leading people cannot be achieved on your own.
3. Leadership begins with humility and a desire to lead.
4. Leading people requires wisdom and maturity.
5. Effective people leadership yields unexpected bonuses for the leader.

### **Relationship to Field of Study**

Developing people is seeing the intrinsic worth in people beyond their abilities and contributions as workers (Spears, 2004). This idea supports this study and the concepts of leadership, servant leadership, stewardship, and listening. According to Spears (2004), by listening intently, the leader seeks to understand and clarify the will of those within a group. Furthermore, by being a steward, the servant leader is committed to serving the needs of others.

According to Spears (2004), “Servant leadership carries with it a deep current of passion and meaning” (p. 1). Leaders need to ask two important questions. What is it all about? Is it about me or is it about my team? Christian leaders, at some point in their journey, will be challenged with these questions. Servant leadership can only be achieved when one understands God’s grace at work in their life. The world will respond to Christ when Christians genuinely serve them. “True spiritual leadership, which is leadership led by the Holy Spirit, focuses on success for God’s church rather than on personal gain” (Jones, April 2015).

The author also reviewed the relationship to previous empirical research that has come before this research. The most significant literature was the research by Maurer and London (2018). Maurer and London (2018) studied the role identity shift from individual contributor to a leader. This paper specifically focused on the degrees of role identity shift from incremental to radical. Maurer and London (2018) researched role identity shift from individual contributor to leader in the context of innovation. A specific aspect of this study was the need for a new leadership mind-set. Maurer and London (2018) reflected on younger workers who have tried to stand out by focusing on analytical intelligence and working longer instead of changing behaviors and mindsets. The paper by Maurer and London (2018) is a significant starting place by which this study has been launched.

**Summary of the significance of the study.** This study was significant to address the three gaps that were identified. As each gap was discussed, shared, and analyzed, the ability of the findings to make a significant contribution to improving leadership development, leadership transitions, and people leader behaviors can reduce the high failure rate of leadership success. More importantly, as Generation X and Millennials move into new roles, this study can help organizations succeed and substantially reduce the cost of leadership transition failures.

## **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The literature review reflects the research of five key areas relevant to this study. The first section discussed leadership development programs by reviewing the function itself, the success factors, and the current literature surrounding the failure of such programs. The literature review then continued with a review of the delayed retirement of Baby Boomers, and the career progression expectations of Generation X and Millennials. Thirdly, the literature review reviewed leadership transitions, and the research related to making an impact when in a new role along with the research around successful and unsuccessful leadership transitions. Next, the literature review explored the current literature surrounding individual contributors and people leaders. And lastly, the literature review looked at recent scholarly information regarding the impact of economic cycles on promotions, career progressions, and leadership transitions. Sobratee and Bodhanya (2018) best summarized the coming leadership challenges by saying “the future is not what it used to be” (p. 1).

The strategy used for searching the literature included a review of recent scholarly peer-reviewed sources. Other strategies included reviewing recent literature from today’s top recruiting firms on leadership transitions and the recent research conducted by these firms. Thirdly, supplemental information was pulled from governmental sources regarding economic cycle metrics concerning employment. For each strategy above, important key words were used that expanded the search parameters of the literature review to broaden the scope to minimize bias in the search process. Databases included, but were not limited to, the JFL Library, Google Scholar, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bain & Company, The Global Leadership Forecast of 2018, and Korn Ferry.

## **Leadership Development Programs**

Leadership development programs exist to “embrace and address several challenges: assessing change readiness, coaching others, innovating and continuously improving quality, working across generations, and identifying talented individuals to build high-performing organizations” (Freeman, Nelson & Sinha, 2018, p. 2272). The main tool used by organizations to produce the right kind of leader is through the organization’s leadership development programs. Leadership development programs have specific goals that support the organization’s vision and mission. According to Holt, Hall, and Gilley (2018), leadership development programs should be motivational, recognize the diversity of each individual, and teach collaboration and teamwork. Motivation, collaboration, and teamwork are especially important to focus leaders on the right behaviors of the organization. This includes an emphasis on profitability and driving results.

However, organizations and senior executives are still learning that leaders are hard to find and develop. According to Lamsen (2018), organizations are becoming more and more desperate for leaders. The leadership vacuum facing many organizations is quickly emerging as the top challenge for businesses. According to a survey of more than 1,000 corporate executive leaders, the top challenge was not globalization, recessions, or geopolitical instability - the top challenge was developing leaders (Ray, 2018). This challenge is forcing executives to rethink leadership and better distinguish leadership from management. The complication with leadership development is that, in practice, organizations still do not have a clear definition of leadership or management (Samosudova, 2019). The need to develop leaders and better define leadership development programs of the future is critical as more than 60% of managers concluded that developing leaders was a high priority (Ray, 2018).

According to Sobratee and Bodhanya (2018), the significant and swift changes created by the rise of the knowledge economy has made traditional leadership approaches obsolete. As it relates to leadership approaches, these authors state that the future is very different than the past. Sobratee and Bodhanya (2018) developed a framework to prepare global leaders for this uncertain future specifically designed to distinguish leadership from management. In this framework, the difference between leadership mindset and management mindset are explained. The management mindset is considered business process management while the leadership mindset is considered feedback (Sobratee & Bodhanya, 2018). These authors also emphasize the need for an entrepreneurial mindset as a key leadership survival competency of the future. This mindset is mostly observed with the rise of globalization and global mega-trends.

The pressure to develop leaders is even more complicated as many organizations and individuals work on a global scale. Globalization has added to the complexity of many leadership development programs as global leaders are even harder to find than domestic leaders. The pressure on leadership development programs to focus on global competencies is becoming more and more important. This pressure facing leadership development programs has intensified in recent years as there is a critical need to develop effective global leaders and adopt a constant change mentality (Park, Jeong, Jang, Yoon, & Lim, 2018). Organizations must be designed for change to compete in the future – creating change, not only reacting to changes (Sobratee & Bodhanya, 2018).

The most compelling example of the need for effective leadership development programs is in coaching. The objective of leadership and career coaching is to improve leadership performance through specific, measurable, actionable, results oriented, and time bound goals (Brooks & Skiem, 2018). According to Lamsen (2018), more than 93% of managers feel

inadequate to effectively coach their teams. Effective coaching is a major emphasis in leadership programs. The trend towards more effective coaching is an outcome of the emergence of reengineering employee performance management processes. Most organizations are moving away from annual performance evaluations to more frequent reviews (Hartley, 2018). This change is placing more emphasis on day-to-day coaching.

According to Trevillion (2018), coaching results are falling short with little data to reflect the effectiveness of coaching programs compared to the revenue spent on coaching. An important way to improve coaching effectiveness is to have a three-way coaching contract discussed, developed, and signed at the beginning of the coaching engagement (Trevillion, 2018). The three-way contract can ensure the coachee, the coachee's manager, and the program manager responsible for the coaching process are aligned. During this meeting, the expectations of the program are discussed. Trevillion (2018) found that feedback on coaching programs is very limited. Coaching as a tool for leadership development is still limited in its maturity.

The immediate pressure facing leadership development programs, the need to produce more effective global leaders, and the lack of effective coaching has placed the future of leadership in jeopardy. An alarming 2,500 human resource professionals indicated that developing and identifying future talent is the number one skill needed in the next 36 months (Ray, 2018).

**Leadership development and success factors.** Lamsen (2018) found that the extensive research around the war for talent, retention, and overall talent management is not going away anytime soon. The need to identify the critical success factors of leadership development programs to succeed under the pressure of today's businesses is paramount. The process of recruiting and hiring people combined with the economic challenges facing domestic and

international environments place more and more emphasis on the need for effective and successful leadership development programs (Lamsen, 2018).

Creating and developing a pool of leaders is the top concern of organizations today (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017). To address the numerous challenges of today's environments, the development of top talent is the path to future organizational success (Ray, 2018). In recent years, the leadership development research has focused either on behaviors, competencies, or both. More and more organizations are teaching behaviors that leaders should start doing, stop doing, or continue to do. According to Park et al. (2018), research reflects that for leadership development programs to be successful the focus needs to be on behavioral indicators instead of recommended competencies. However, the research appears to be mixed as to what the critical success factors are to create a highly effective leadership development program. Park et al. (2018) found that leadership development programs have wrongly described success as competencies involving personality traits, abilities, and mindset. According to Park et al. (2018), many organizations have constructed leadership development curriculum around competencies, personality traits, abilities, and mindset leading to failed programs. As such, the more successful leadership development programs have constructed curriculum in terms of behavioral statements (Park et al., 2018). To create and develop a strong pool of leadership talent, leadership development programs should focus on success behaviors.

**Leadership development and failure.** Leadership development programs are failing because organizations have not recognized that the days of traditional career paths and step-by-step career promotions are no longer valid (Lamsen, 2018). The traditional view of a job and a career path are quickly eroding. The delay in organizations to quickly reinvent leadership development programs to adapt to the new idea of career progression is contributing to the high

failure rate of such programs. The traditional career path is changing in small businesses as well as in large more established businesses (Lamsen, 2018). This is an issue facing many firms, and the potential to train leaders on out-of-date curriculum is a real challenge and potentially disastrous (Lamsen, 2018).

According to Holt et al. (2018), the result of incompetent and ineffective leaders is disastrous. The bad news is that it may not be the participants fault. It could be the lack of leadership development programs teaching the right things (Holt et al., 2018). Leadership development programs need to be questioned for their ability to teach relevant principles. Even though leadership development programs exist in most every organization, the programs still need to be tested and stretched to be effective (Holt et al., 2018). The results of today's leadership development programs do not provide the evidence of effective leadership.

To this day, the collective research of scholars conclude that little real actionable evidence exists that future leaders are being developed and prepared properly (Park et al., 2018). Most organizations do not realize the lack of developing and training future leaders until they are trying to fill a vacant role. It is sometimes at this time that hiring managers realize and understand the impact of poorly prepared leaders (Park et al., 2018). With the current tightness of the labor market coupled with a large percentage of unprepared leaders, the leadership challenge of the next five to ten years is in a desperate situation. Waiting until recruiting and hiring positions may be too late to be successful.

Davies (2018) further explained that past skills and capabilities will not work in the future. The challenges facing workers today is volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Davies, 2018). To thrive in the future, in a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous world, leaders need greater emotional intelligence, know who they are, what values or beliefs drive

them, and why they do what they do (Davies, 2018). To counter volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, the author suggests leaders focus on vision, understanding, clarity, and agility. With more and more unprepared leaders plus the lack of vision, understanding, clarity, and agility an organizations ability to attract, develop, recruit, and retain future leaders continues to be in jeopardy.

As such, more and more evidence points to the lack of an organization's ability to recruit their own people for higher level roles. According to Ray (2018), only 43% of positions could be filled with internal candidates immediately. As a result, the future of succession planning success will be challenged. According to Fusarelli, Fusarelli, and Riddick (2018), succession planning is more than finding the right person for the right seat on the bus. Succession planning is a continuous and dynamic process of constantly identifying and developing future leaders (Fusarelli et al., 2018). This requires stretching leaders early in their career (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Organizations that intentionally groom leaders for the future will be more prepared for the challenges of today's complex environments.

The lack of alignment of leadership development programs to today's expectations should be alarming to many Board of Directors. According to Ray (2018), 50% of organizations have failed to create leadership development programs that have strategic alignment. Leadership development programs should focus on the alignment of organizational goals and the future development needs of leaders.

### **Career Progression of Generation X and Millennials**

**Delayed retirement of Baby Boomers.** Understanding the impact of changing retirement patterns will be important to the study of leadership transitions and career progressions. It is a fact that men and women are working longer (Clark & Morrill, 2017).

There are many influences on these decisions: economic factors, health issues, and social security (Clark & Morrill, 2017). The number of older men and women in the workplace has been increasing. From 1994 to 2014, the change for workers aged 62 and older increased from 45.1% to 56.2%. Clark and Morrill (2017) also stated that “many policy analysts, economists, and demographers have argued that individuals must extend their work lives if they are to achieve their desired standard of living in retirement” (p. 2). A key emerging question is whether employers will have the desire to accommodate those who are looking for a later retirement (Clark & Morrill, 2017).

Not only is the traditional concept of a job or role changing, but the concept of work hours and retirement are changing. According to Gratton (2018), the way people work is undergoing massive transformation. This shift is due to robotic process automation (RPA) and machine learning (Gratton, 2018). The changes in the way people work impact both higher skilled workers and lower skilled workers (Gratton, 2018). As such, the role of individuals and work is no longer the cycle of full-time education, full-time work, and then full-time retirement (Gratton, 2018). This will require C-level executives to focus on a work narrative, a learning perspective, and flexibility in role models (Gratton, 2018). This continues to build on the research that leadership development programs are facing a complicated future. Starting with the Baby Boomers or Boomers, it is evident from literature that how people view retirement has been changing for some time.

Miller (2014) found a low-velocity of career progressions due to older workers staying in their jobs longer can be frustrating for younger workers. Miller (2014) goes on to say that “in many cases they seem locked down, as if proclaiming, “We won’t go” (p. 1). As such, organizations that have a core strategy to attract and promote new talent will struggle (Miller,

2014). Organizations typically perform better when incentives are used to encourage older workers to retire (Miller, 2014). The slow-down of career progressions and career advancements related to the aging workforce and the delayed retirement of Baby Boomers can increase the exodus of talent workers from many organizations.

According to Chambré and Netting (2018), 80% of Boomers responding to an American Association of Retired Persons survey indicated that they would continue to work beyond the traditional retirement age. In this survey, the Boomers reported that their retirement would not be similar to their parent's retirement. There is some indication that the impact of the changing retirement actions of Baby Boomers and the upcoming Generation X is still unknown. Wolters (2018) reported that the retirement patterns of Baby Boomers has disrupted the statistical comparisons of work hours as many Boomers continue to work part-time.

As such, the interest in the retirement patterns of Baby Boomers has been a significant subject of research (Chambré & Netting, 2018). According to Sawyer and James (2018), the meaning of retirement is changing due to the aging population, improved life expectancy, improvements in health care, and how governmental entities view retirement. The magnitude of these retirement patterns is staggering, for example, Chambré and Netting (2018) stated that in 2020, over 32 million Boomers will have passed their 65<sup>th</sup> birthdays. The research of the retirement patterns of Boomers is also significant for females. For example, Sawyer and James (2018) found that females are working past retirement age due to the disadvantage's women faced in employment early in their career and their roles as care-givers. The female role as a care-giver relates to leadership transitions as female workers move in and out of the workforce at different times. According to Gratton (2018), family structure is also impacted by technology and demographics.

As Baby Boomers continue to work and ultimately retire, organizations are challenged with finding the right talent to fill key roles. According to Srividya Prathiba (2017), Generation X and Millennial workers are more likely to be promoted to higher roles faster than previous generations creating a “mismatch between the talent in-hand and the expected talent” (p. 44). The mismatch means that younger workers may not be prepared for leadership transitions when they are required to lead others earlier in their careers exposing their potential lack of leadership experience. As Srividya Prathiba (2017) pointed out, the expectations for these roles and the skills and talent of the individuals in leadership roles is a growing concern.

**Career progression of Generation X.** Individuals think about career progression in different ways. For example, “about 15 percent of Millennials consider career development a key factor, compared with just 10 percent of Generation X workers and 5 percent of Baby Boomers” (“The Top 5 Workers Who want Career Progression,” 2018, p. 1). Leadership development programs will need to shape curriculum in different ways to address these varying views of the need for career development. This is also a factor in how different generations think about success. Each generation also views career success in slightly different ways.

According to Srividya Prathiba (2017), career success is simply stated as an individual’s hierarchical progression in a job or occupation, and each generation will have different perceptions about career success. Current literature is replete with information and debate regarding the various generations in the work force today and how each generation is thinking different about work (Benefits, 2017). Specific to Generation X, this generation is focused, results oriented, people-oriented, ready for change, and able to handle strategic and ambiguous situations (Srividya Prathiba, 2017). These characteristics of Generation X leaders can lead to frustration regarding career progression. As Baby Boomers delay retirement and Millennials

aggressively pursue opportunities, organizations could take their eye off of Generation X potential in higher level roles.

**Career progression of Millennials.** Millennials have a hunger to progress quickly in their careers, but 66% of Millennials report being unprepared in their first job (“Millennials Crave for Career Progression”, 2018). With 66% of Millennials reporting being unprepared, Singleton (2018) found that 21% of Millennials are currently in leadership positions managing others and more than two thirds see leadership positions in their future – in the next 5 to 10 years. The ineffectiveness of leadership development programs to prepare Millennials for new roles is a growing concern. As Millennials become more and more a part of the leadership fabric of an organization, career progression and leadership transition research in the next several years will be needed.

The importance of this study to help Millennials understand effective leadership transitions will be critical as Millennials will be the generation that changes jobs at a greater rate than any other generation. Millennials are leaving their first jobs to find greater opportunity and professional growth, but report staying in their current jobs if they have clarity around the next career opportunity (“Millennials Crave for Career Progression,” 2018). This is further evidence of the importance of leadership transition research for Millennials. The need for organizations to create many opportunities for career advancement is important for leadership development programs.

Andrews (2018) found that 70% of recent university graduates rank career opportunities as the most important element when seeking career positions. One impact of the Great Recession was the lack of job opportunities which many Millennials addressed by staying in

school, and as a result, the higher educational level of Millennials is another consideration for leadership development programs.

Millennials have the highest percentage of college degreed individuals than any other generation (Singleton, 2018). As a result, the ability of an organization to help Millennials develop a career roadmap showing scenarios for career growth is a proven strategy to retain Millennial talent (Andrews, 2018). With 19.8 million Millennials holding an undergraduate or higher, the need for visible career paths and leadership transition strategies is critical (Singleton, 2018).

### **Individual Contributor and People Leader**

**Individual contributor.** The review of literature regarding individual contributors is two-sided, focused either on the need and benefits of transitioning from an individual contributor to a people leader, or the need and benefits for developing more professional individual contributors. The research reflects a need for employees to be able to effectively change their role identity as business and needs change. Maurer and London (2018) defined three role identity shifts for individual contributors.

***Role identity shift.*** The first identity shift is to remain an individual contributor and focus on updating and developing new skills. The research shows that moving forward, more roles will emerge where a successful individual contributor is what will be required. This is evident in the growing ways individuals are earning income through digital media. This is also evident as many organizations continue to realize that they have created too much bureaucracy. This has led to more overhead than is needed. As technology improves the connection between teams and the automation of business functions, complex hierarchical structures are not needed.

The second identity shift is involves adding people leadership competencies to one's identity as an individual contributor. This is the approach most leadership development programs take to produce today's leaders. The failure with leadership programs is the emphasis is mostly on adding skills versus eliminating skills and behaviors. This approach can be effective, but when the individual is placed in stressful situations, the natural tendency is to do the task yourself. A more radical approach is needed.

The third identity shift is radical, defined as completely changing one's behavior and identity to become a leader of others (Maurer & London, 2018). This concept is defined by Maurer and London (2018) as a role identity shift which involves individual contributors redefining how they behave and learn the requirements of a new role. This change is difficult mainly because organizations typically reward individual contribution and not people leadership contributions. It is important that leadership development programs have a culture that reinforces the behaviors of the program. In many organizations, the program learning outcomes are not what is recognized by the executives.

***Teaching technical skills or leadership skills.*** This problem is further exasperated in university and college programs. According to Cerri (2016), universities teach technical skills, but most likely did not teach students how to express ideas and the skills needed to progress to a manager or leader role. Due to the lack of teaching at the university level and the lack of reinforcement in many organizations, Maurer and London (2018) discussed the concept of creative destruction as a critical aspect of leadership development.

***Creative role destruction.*** As organizations and people cope with the rapidly changing business environment, the ability to reinvent or recreate the organization is important. For this to be successful, people need to embrace the concept of creative destruction. The natural seasonal

process of fall, winter, spring, and summer is an example of creative destruction occurring at a relatively frequent pace. Embracing this concept personally will be a key differentiator for leadership development programs. The most successful individuals will be able to match the rapidly changing business with personal change. However, the idea of creative role destruction is an aspect of leadership development that is largely missing in today's leadership development programs. This is a key tool to transition from an individual contributor role to a people leader role.

The challenge is that many organizations only know how to award individual contributor efforts, as a result, the likelihood of continued failure of leadership transitions is expected. It is harder and harder for employees to change their identity from an individual contributor to a people leader when organizations value individual contributions (Maurer & London, 2018). Many of the leaders in today's large organizations started the organizations as an effective individual contributor and entrepreneur. As these individuals helped grow their business, they quickly moved to leadership roles with an individual contributor mindset. The idea of a role shift was foreign to many of today's executives. The best organizations understand the importance of both individual contributors and people leaders. As Pepper (2018) found, successful and balanced organizations need employees that are highly motivated consisting of both people leaders and individual contributors.

For an employee to move towards people leadership, he or she needs to focus more on strategy and a role identity shift, however, organizations can send mixed messages that pull employees back towards individual contributor activity (Maurer & London, 2018). Reinventing a career is hard work. When organizations reward people leaders for individual effort, the impact can be devastating. The reward and recognition of people leaders needs to reinforce the

people leadership behaviors. When this happens, the personal satisfaction can create the right loyalty. As Cerri (2016) found, when employees re-invent a dead-end career path it leads to a career journey that can be exciting, passionate, and satisfying.

***Individual contributor as a personal brand.*** The concept of an individual brand or marketing oneself can be an inhibitor to leadership transitions. Maurer and London (2018) found that employees spend years developing their individual brand or identity and then are asked to completely transform from who they have been to a new role in order to climb the corporate ladder - which is not an easy transition. An individual's career and income potential can be negatively impacted when leadership transitions fail. Leadership development programs need to focus on enabling successful transitions. Without this focus, the inability to change and adapt can derail a leader's career (Maurer & London, 2018).

***Individual contributors as leaders.*** However, Abrahams (2017) found that some of the better ideas do not come from people leaders but from individual contributors. Organizations should not say that everyone is a leader if their leadership development programs are not designed to support this statement (Hassell, 2016). Pepper (2018) went as far as to say that people leaders account for 33% of an organization's payroll, but do not deliver 33% in productivity. One of the challenges with people leaders is that they forget that they still must deliver results and communicate the results. Just because an individual has climbed the corporate ladder to a people leader role does not mean the bottom-line results no longer matter. The bottom-line results could matter even more - if you are successful as a people leader, you create more individual contributors that can make immediate impacts. As such, Maurer and London (2018) found that it is important to unlearn the behaviors that made an employee a successful individual contributor to make the transition to a people leader. However, Kraft

(2018) found that when people become managers, it can lead them away from what they are passionate and successful at doing.

***Embracing individual contributors.*** As a result, one company is rethinking traditional leadership development and embracing the individual contributor journey (Kraft, 2018). Some organizations can actually excel when they are more heavily weighted towards individual contributor roles over people leader roles. The increasing trend of remote work and autonomy are contributing to this factor. In the hiring and recruitment process, human resources professionals need to add individual contributor and people leader questions to the interview. For example, Maurer and London (2018) also talk about a willingness to hire employees that desire the challenge of taking on a successful leadership journey from individual contributor through the leadership ranks. Organizations, however, should not forget about individual contributors (Hassell, 2016).

Individual contributors may also have more influence than managers when working in and with teams (Abrahams, 2017). Individual contributors should not be overlooked for development opportunities because organizations focus more on leaders of people than on individual contributors (Abrahams, 2017). New research indicates that a shift in leadership development is needed in order to produce more individual contributors. Today, leadership is more than a collection of managers who lead others, leadership is also the ability to develop professional individual contributors (Kraft, 2018).

These highly professional individual contributors may intentionally choose a career path that does not involve the management of people for a variety of reasons (Ho, 2018). It is important to understand the desires of each employee and develop attractive career paths for an individual contributor track. There are many reasons why employees may not want to be people

leaders. For example, the tactical burdens of a manager are not always attractive to individual contributors, such as, managing people's performance, budgets, reports, and attending numerous meetings.

***High-performing individual contributors.*** According to Abrahams (2017), leadership development programs are not reaching talented individual contributors. The research suggests that individual contributors need to be more focused on improving their skill sets to succeed as individual contributors. Individual contributors need to learn how to be effective members of project teams and visibly support their manager in special projects (Hassell, 2016). Leadership development programs should be more structured to develop high-performing individual contributors.

Today, leadership development programs are mostly structured to train managers or people leaders for career progression instead of the leadership training needed for individual contributors (Pepper, 2018). The perception this creates in the mind of high impact individual contributors is demotivating. More investment is needed to create the individual contributor of the future. As such, organizations should invest in the growth of individual contributors to compete in today's complex business environment (Abrahams, 2017).

**What is a corporate ladder anymore?** There is extensive research regarding the complexity of today's organizations. This complexity combined with the external complexity of a fast-moving business environment has challenged the traditional corporate ladder progression process. As Ho (2018) found, the highly complex career progression ladder of most organizations is becoming ineffective. According to Willyerd and Mistick (2016), there are seven trends that will impact career progression moving forward. The trends include globalization, demographic shifts, explosion of data, emerging technology, climate change,

redefined jobs, and complexity. According to Willyerd and Mistick (2016), leaders that can create the right clarity by focusing on structure, process, systems and culture will win in the future. The other trend that is impacting employees is the fact that the definition of a job is rapidly changing (Willyerd & Mistick, 2016).

**Definition of a job.** A major change impacting the definition of a job is the flattening of business. The future is more about flatter organizations. As an example, one organization is experimenting with a workforce with no managers (Ho, 2018). This research will place a greater demand on the need to develop individual contributors. This will also change the definition of a people leader. All leaders, whether they are individual contributors or people leaders, are searching for a new meaning in work. Employees are searching for joy and excitement. As Kraft (2018) discussed, there is an immediate need to develop high-level individual contributors and free them to pursue activity that brings them the most joy and excitement. A traditional role inhibitor for individual contributors has been soft skills. Soft skills include the ability to relate with and motivate people. This does not mean the people are necessarily direct reports. As such, leadership development programs should invest in individual contributors to develop soft skills and technical skills that will improve the efficiency of the work (Abrahams, 2017).

**Growth and development.** Further research by Pepper (2018) explained that a new method of career growth can be developed when individual contributors are also viewed as leaders. This begins to reshape the term individual contributor and people leader. These terms will become obsolete in the coming years as a way to describe employees. Pepper (2018) redefined the impact of individual contributors as high professionals versus the impact of people leaders as high potentials. Abrahams (2017) found that individual contributors are more loyal to organizations when they have opportunities to grow and develop.

*A successful individual contributor.* As organizations focus more on the importance and impact of individual contributors, the factors that determine a successful individual contributor are changing. Successful individual contributors need communication skills, an ability to have crucial conversations, to understand the performance management process, and how to have strategic influence (Hassell, 2016). Ho (2018) found that titles do not matter. Job titles and the power of position are also undergoing change as the organizations redefine individual contributor success profiles. As these changes take effect, the organizations new leaders will emerge.

A critical factor for leadership development programs to consider when investing in individual contributors is the opportunity to find the next great leader (Abrahams, 2017). According to Pepper (2018), even though not everyone is geared to be a manager or people leader, individual contributors are leaders without manager title. A leader with a manager title does not guarantee a successful contribution or an ability to have positive influence (Ho, 2018). Also, individuals without a manager title can be highly influential and impactful to an organization (Ho, 2018). Ho (2018), like Pepper (2018), used the term highly professional individual contributors.

Other success factors for individual contributors includes communication. Individual contributors must be able to talk to his or her manager about goals and expectations (Hassell, 2016). The impact of individual contributors needs to be viewed the same as the impact of managers. This concept will relieve the pressure on individuals who think a management track is the only career path to grow personally (Pepper, 2018). These highly professional individual contributors may intentionally choose a career path that does not involve the management of people for a variety of reasons (Ho, 2018). The tactical burdens of a manager are not always attractive to individual contributors, such as, managing people's performance, budgets, reports,

and meetings. Ho (2018) proposed that individual contributors will be needed more in the digital age.

**People leader.** There is significant research regarding the mindset of a people leader versus the actions of a people leader. This research shows a greater impact by focusing on mindset and not just specific actions (Gritz, 2018). According to Klein (2016), mindset is how we handle specific situations based on held beliefs. Klein (2016) also found that the wrong mindset can create obstacles that are hard to remove. Mindset begins to reflect on how people leaders care for and motivate teams.

The traits of successful mindset of a people leader include the insight and awareness to be a person who cares (Micevski, Kadic-Magljalic, Banerjee, Coadogan, & Lee, 2017). According to the literature, the opposite of a mindful leader is a mindless leader. According to Gritz (2018), focus and awareness are critical traits of a mindful leader as opposed to the distraction and autopilot thinking of a mindless leader. The idea of a mindful leader is tied to performance management. The mindful leader is also responsible for the job performance of others (Henry, 2018). A leader with these traits creates a positive environment where the benefits of building a good rapport can be established to achieve the objectives of the team or organization (Micevski et al., 2017). People leaders know that their performance is not based upon their accomplishments, but on the accomplishments of those they lead (Henry, 2018).

The mindful leader is also a selfless leader. Tanner (2018) found that the goal of an emerging leader is to create an environment where the team feels more highly of themselves. It is not the goal for the team to think more highly of the leader. Setting this tone is critical for a people leader. To set the right tone and to establish the right culture, the people leader promotes an environment that is not selfish (Gritz, 2018).

On the other hand, Gritzo (2018) found that a narcissist leader is very insecure focusing mainly on herself or himself. As a result, research suggests that people do not leave certain roles or organizations, but instead, people leave people. Goldberg (2017) found that people leave a poor leader or a bad boss more often than a company or job.

A people leader is also a compassionate leader. According to Gritzo (2018), the traits of a compassionate leader include benevolence, care, and wisdom. The opposite of a compassionate leader can be devastating to a team. Gritzo (2018) found that a leader who lacks compassion can be indifferent and ignore the needs of his or her team. This can lead to the leader's team perceiving the leader as incompetent which creates significant dysfunction (Gritzo, 2018).

Assuming a leadership role requires a mindset shift regarding job performance, a people leader must turn away from personal accomplishments and towards the potential of the one's he or she leads (Henry, 2018). This is what separates an individual contributor from a people leader. The ability of a people leader to create a genuine, vulnerable culture that proves to those he or she leads that they are the most important asset to the company and the team. As such, the most important aspect in the literature review is the need for a leader to focus on his or her own mindset to be in a position to impact the change that is needed in those around them (Gritzo, 2018).

A leader should stop doing the work and start leading the work (Henry, 2018). The literature mentions the need for organizations and leaders to perfect the skill set of constantly renewing a focus on the most strategic competitive work and omitting the non-value-added work. A primary role of a people leader is to reinforce the importance of constantly reinventing work. This is one way a leader helps his or her team maintain the right competitive skills sets that can

continue to keep the team employable. Without this leadership, the skills of team members quickly become outdated in today's fast paced business environment.

The best way to help teams thrive is to give your team focus, function, and fire. You are there to determine what to do and what not to do, when to do it, how to do it, determine what is needed to do it, explain why you're doing it, and instill it all with meaning and purpose. (Henry, 2018)

This style of leadership is particularly important during times of economic uncertainty caused by changes in economic cycles.

### **Changing Economic Cycles and Leadership Development**

During times of changes in economic cycles, progressing up the corporate ladder is difficult (Wile, 2017). The literature regarding the impact of economic cycles, especially The Great Recession of 2008, is beginning to shed more and more light on leadership transitions and career progressions. The need for organizations to plan for uncertainty has never been more important than it is today. According to a recent report by Bain & Company (2018), "The business environment of the 2020s will be more volatile and economic swings more extreme" (p. 1).

According to Donkor and Dongmei (2018), economic uncertainty and the rate of change requires organizations to be more flexible. As an example, over the next 20 years organizations will face a massive shortage of skilled labor. A study by Wile (2017) specifically shows the impact of career progressions during economic recessions and expansions on low-wage workers. Wile (2017) found that during economic expansions, 1.21% of workers progress up the corporate ladder as compared to only 0.73% during economic recessions. This is a decline of 40%.

This uncertainty requires strong leadership. Donkor and Dongmei (2018) found that inspiring and retaining employees during these times requires a different kind of leadership. According to Loehr (2017), the future of work in this world will be extremely different and the today's leadership and business strategies just will not work. The increase in the retirement age along with advancements in healthcare have resulted in older workers becoming a large portion of the American workplace (Heisler & Bandow, 2018). Loehr (2017) found that organizations need to focus on protecting people not jobs. This focus helps repurpose leadership development programs and further highlights the importance of people leadership.

The growing importance of effective leadership is required for businesses to be successful (Donkor & Dongmei, 2018). In economic recessions, the ability to move up the corporate ladder and job mobility are unlikely (Wile, 2017). Specific to The Great Recession, a historically low of 0.19% of workers actually progressed to higher paying jobs every quarter. A decline of 85% from economic expansions (Wile, 2017). As labor dynamics continue to change and become scarcer, leadership transition success will be critical. Between 2020 and 2030, a worldwide labor workforce shortage is projected (Heisler & Bandow, 2018).

**Relationship between leadership development programs and recessions.** Lacerda (2018) defined an economic recession as a “type of crisis originated from external factors that may imperil an organization’s survival depending on the intensity and duration of the crisis” (p. 1). To be proactive, human resource departments and professionals need to incorporate both expansionary leadership curriculum and recessionary leadership development curriculum into the broad programs.

An economic recession is a specific opportunity for human resource professionals to emphasize leadership development programs and adjust the programs to adapt to the economic

concerns of the business (“Leadership development: first (or last) program to cut during recession,” 2008). The modifications should include an emphasis on financial behaviors needed to support the organizations objectives to reduce expenses and improve profitability (“Leadership development: first (or last) program to cut during recession,” 2008).

According to Iordanoglou (2018), the ever changing and instability of today’s business climate has highlighted the ineffectiveness of leadership development programs. The traditional leadership development programs and practices do not produce leaders as quickly as needed to match the rapidly changing pace of business today (Iordanoglou, 2018). There is an immediate need to reengineer leadership development programs.

### **Potential Themes and Perceptions**

Several themes emerge from the literature review. Each theme builds upon the idea that leaders are scarcer than originally thought and leadership development programs are inadequate to prepare leaders for the future. These themes include:

1. Leaders are becoming scarce
2. Leadership development programs are outdated
3. The definition of a job is quickly changing
4. The way people think about career progression is changing
5. A clear career path is expected by today’s younger leaders
6. There is a growing case for more highly professional individual contributors
7. Radical creative role destruction is needed
8. Changing economic cycles have an impact on career progression

**Leaders are scarce.** A significant theme is the search for leaders is becoming more and more difficult. As Lamsen (2018) found, organizations are becoming more and more desperate

for leaders. This dynamic coupled with a large portion of managers feeling inadequate to coach employees is impacting the field of leadership and leadership transitions. As Lamsen (2018) discovered more than 93% of managers feel inadequate to effectively coach their teams. As such, the war for talent is just beginning. A leadership perfect storm is on the horizon. The perfect storm is comprised of leader scarceness, a lack of a coaching competency, and ineffective leadership development programs.

A decade has almost passed since White (2010) declared 2020 would be a perfect storm in leadership development. According to White (2010), the perfect storm begins with the exodus of talented and experienced workers. The perfect storm then grows with the lack or scarcity of skilled workers. White (2010) found that skilled workers are “the only lasting resource of competitive advantage” (p. 1). The ability for organizations to properly handle the exodus of experienced workers while simultaneously engaging younger workers will be the number one challenge (White, 2010). As the perfect storm grows in strength, the final aspect is the world in which we are entering. The world White (2010) predicted is here. The world is faced with changing technology and globalization. Additionally, the way by which organizations engage customers and collaborate is also changing while at the same time the culture of organizations is changing to be more peer-based (White, 2010). As predicted in 2010, “organizations that fail to adapt will not last” (White, 2010).

**Leadership development programs are outdated.** Another related theme is the need to repurpose leadership development programs. There is overwhelming evidence that leadership development programs are failing. This is also impacting leadership transitions and career paths. Leadership development programs are failing because organizations have not recognized that the

days of traditional career paths and step-by-step career promotions are no longer valid (Lamsen, 2018). Doyle (2019) found that a career path is rarely a straight line today.

According to Doyle (2019), a blueprint for climbing the corporate ladder no longer exist. Doyle (2019) relates a career path to being as unique as each individual. Today's career paths are impacted by today's lifestyles. As such, a career path may be tied to seasons of life. This includes vertical advancement, lateral moves, and moving down in an organization (Doyle, 2019). This could also include moving from one company to another on purpose. This allows someone to develop new skill sets with the declared intention of returning to previous places of employment. According to Doyle (2019), individuals can change jobs at least 10 to 15 times during their career. Today, moving down the career ladder is no longer viewed as a bad step. Moving down and then back up to gain additional training and experience is more and more needed today. Without a new view of career paths, leadership development programs will continue to be ineffective.

Poor leadership development programs have produced today's poor leaders. According to Holt et al. (2018), today's leadership development programs do not teach the right things. To this day, the collective research of scholars conclude that little real actionable evidence exists that future leaders are being developed and prepared properly (Park et al., 2018). The evidence includes the lack of an organization's ability to recruit their own people for higher level roles.

**The definition of a job is changing.** In addition to the theme of poorly prepared leaders, another theme is the fast-changing definition of a job or role, the changing concept of work and work hours. The combination of the new definition of a job, the changing aspect of work hours, and retirement have a significant impact on leadership transitions. These themes, when viewed

in their entirety, reveal that leadership development programs are facing a complicated yet exciting future.

According to Pal (2015), the eight to five or nine to five worlds are simply dead. Pal (2015) found that everyone is simultaneously working and not working all the time. It is a melting pot of 24-hour working and non-working – texting a friend, planning a vacation, closing a business deal, working on a presentation, and sipping coffee at a local coffee shop all together (Pal, 2015). Colleagues are friends and friends are colleagues – everything happens at once (Pal, 2015). There is good and bad to this new world. On the downside, confidentiality is at risk. Pal (2015) found that “there aren’t secrets and walls between a personal life and professional life” (p. 2). The good news is that, if managed correctly, the 24-hour work and non-work environment can be energizing, flexible, and freeing. The growing emergence of personal life satisfaction is becoming more important than career status or title. And as such, how people think about careers is different. The changing definition of a job will require a change in the approach to training and developing people leaders.

**The way people think about career progression is changing.** The way people view and think about career progression is also changing. A larger percentage of Millennials view career development as more important than other generations (“The Top 5 Workers Who want Career Progression,” 2018). Despite this theme of changing perceptions of career progression, especially with Millennials, there is also overwhelming evidence that leaders feel unprepared for their role. These themes continue to point to a challenging future as more and more unprepared Millennials take on leadership roles.

As has been stated, the themes and perceptions regarding the definition of work is impacting how people think about their career. For example, an individual’s career includes

more sabbaticals. According to Burkus (2017), the benefits from an extended vacation, surprise vacation, or sabbatical include less stress and an increase in innovation. “The percentage of companies offering sabbaticals (both paid and unpaid) rose to nearly 17% of employers in 2017” (Burkus, 2017, p. 2). Research is also showing the benefits of a sabbatical last longer than other breaks (Burkus, 2017). Important research from Burkus (2017) indicated that a sabbatical helps individuals become more confident leaders. A more important outcome of the research shows that the leaders who stepped up to fill the gaps during the sabbatical developed skillsets more quickly and the relationship with the sabbatical leader become even stronger (Burkus, 2017). Specific to this study, sabbaticals improved the likely hood of promoting from within as other leaders filled the vacancy of the sabbatical leader. A sabbatical is a key future tool to help the younger workers progress.

**A clear career path is expected by younger generations.** Another theme is the growing percentage of college graduates who are placing a high importance on career opportunities during the hiring process. College graduates are choosing organizations to work for based upon the strength of their leadership development programs and career opportunities when seeking jobs. An important theme, as almost 20 million Millennials hold college degrees, is the need to create visible career paths for new hires (Johnson, 2019).

According to Johnson (2019), Millennials prefer growth and development or skill-building instead of job security. The concept of picking a role for a career like accountant or doctor is not what drives Millennials (Johnson, 2019). Instead, Millennials are driven by job fit and motivational fit. This desire has been misinterpreted by researches as selfishness when instead it is a recognition by Millennials that they have goals for how to live life not how to work (Johnson, 2019). As such, Millennials look for careers that allow them to develop, grow, and

gain various experiences. Research by Johnson (2019) found that “millennials have clearly indicated that they are willing to be productive and dedicated to a company that helps them achieve work-life balance” (p. 2).

**Highly professional individual contributors are on the rise.** A major theme of the literature review is the new way individual contributors are viewed. The literature indicates either the need to transition from an individual contributor to a people leader or to develop highly professional individual contributors. Today’s changing jobs may require more individual contributors than people leaders. Leadership development programs are underperforming as they mostly teach people leadership skills.

According to Ferrier (2017), leadership pipelines excluded individual contributors and placed the emphasis on managing others. Instead of doing the work, the past was more about overseeing the work and motivating teams to accomplish and deliver the results (Ferrier, 2017). As business is changing, middle management is shrinking. With automation and technological advancements, organizations are moving towards an hour glass model and away from a pyramid organizational rationale (Ferrier, 2017). The shift from a pyramid organizational structure to an hour glass structure is also being supported by customer demands. According to Ferrier (2017), customers are requiring greater expert knowledge, onshoring, and partnerships in digitization. As a result, the challenge for today’s leaders is for middle management to remain relevant (Ferrier, 2017). It is the middle management layer that will be squeezed the most. For middle management to remain relevant, a move from overseeing a collection of work to individual contributors is needed (Ferrier, 2017). Evidence of the growing difficulty to remain relevant is the increase in numerous and unproductive meetings. Middle managers who do not remain relevant find themselves in meetings thinking they are productive as they continue to convince

themselves that they are achieving results by overseeing activity. The result is a redundant and irrelevant organization (Ferrier, 2017). Leaders must reinvent themselves to be relevant.

**Radical creative role destruction may be needed.** To reinvent leaders, there is a growing need for creative role destruction. This is focused on the need for individuals, who desire a shift to a better more relevant leadership, to redefine who they are and how they behave. Creative role destruction is completely changing one's behavior and identity to become a new type of leader (Maurer & London, 2018). Related to this is the theme that universities teach technical skills but do not teach leadership skills.

According to Bridle (2018), the difference between change and reinvention is small but impactful. The competencies needed to navigate through a storm is different than the competencies to stay straight on a large highway (Bridle, 2018). Leadership is about change and adapting, but some situations require a complete reinvention (Bridle, 2018). Compared to adaptation, where the focus is inward and on individuals, reinvention requires leaders to move from incremental improvements to organizational remodeling (Bridle, 2018). According to Bridle (2018), remodeling focuses on the whole not individual parts. Reinvention leadership is about planning a precise outcome and achieving specific goals. Reinvention leadership is tied to a greater organizational leadership outcome. As an example, a company may need to shift from production oriented to supply chain-oriented leadership (Bridle, 2018). Leadership styles of the past cannot support the reinvention that is needed across the whole business today (Bridle, 2018). Changing a process or system can support incremental change, but reinvention must be a rebuilding from the ground up (Bridle, 2018). More and more research links leadership to profitability (Bridle, 2018). Strategies must be centralized, strategies must be reformed,

strategies must be responsive, and involve human resources (Bridle, 2018). Organizational rationale and structure must change.

A theme for many companies is changing their organizational design and rationale to be more individual contributor based. This is because some of the better ideas do not come from people leaders but from individual contributors. As a result, one company is rethinking traditional leadership development and embracing the individual contributor journey (Kraft, 2018).

**The economic cycle and impact on career progressions.** The literature review revealed a relationship between economic cycles (expansions and recessions), retirements, and career progressions. As Wile (2017) found, career progressions during economic recessions is difficult. A study by Wile (2017) specifically shows the impact of career progressions during economic recessions and expansions on low-wage workers. Wile (2017) found that during economic expansions, 1.21% of workers progress up the corporate ladder as compared to only 0.73% during economic recessions. This is a decline of 40%.

According to Harewood (2018), downsizing is the result of economic recessions. But instead of an organization waiting for the trigger of a recession to act on downsizing or rightsizing, downsizing needs to be a continual part of an organization's overall strategy. The most important group of individuals to consider during downsizing is the survivors. Survivors can go through emotions that could inhibit an organization from moving forward and through a recession. Harewood (2018) found that they may lack motivation, engagement, and productivity. This is expressed by survivors with fear, anger, and perception of unfairness leading to low levels of commitment. According to Harewood (2018), repeat downsizing can also lead to employees experiencing a failure cycle which leads to inaction. Leadership development

programs must focus on training and developing new skills in its people during a recession. This includes assisting employees with rethinking career pathing and growth and development plans (Harewood, 2018).

**Conclusion – Themes and Perceptions.** These themes and perceptions shaped this project. The changing view of individual contributors will impact the study of leadership transitions. The changing view of individual contributors will also influence the future people leader. If the future consists of a larger number of individual contributors, the role of a people leader or manager will be different.

**Summary of the literature review.** A summary of the literature review includes an in-depth review of recent literature concerning the impact of leadership development programs. This review reveals an overwhelming sense that leadership development programs are failing and are teaching the wrong curriculum to the wrong type of people. The literature further identified the changing definition of jobs and careers by all generations. This changing view of jobs, work hours, and retirement impacts career progression and leadership transition. Another result of the literature review is the recent findings that leaders are becoming more and more difficult to find. As Lamsen (2018) found, the extensive research regarding the war for talent, retention, and overall talent management is not going away anytime soon. Lamsen (2018) also found that leadership development programs are failing because organizations have not recognized that the days of traditional career paths and step-by-step career promotions are no longer valid.

A significant finding from the literature review is that the research of individual contributors is two-sided, focused either on the need and benefits of transitioning from an individual contributor to a people leader, or the need and benefits for developing more

professional individual contributors. The growing literature review of the need for more capable individual contributors due to the changing jobs will become a greater force in the future and change leadership development programs. As Abrahams (2017) found, some of the best ideas do not come from people leaders but from individual contributors.

Leadership development of individual contributors will change the idea of career progression and leadership transitions. In addition to the new thinking around individual contributors, the literature review studied the impact of economic recessions on career progressions. Wile (2017) found that progressing up the corporate ladder is more difficult during recessionary periods. A study by Wile (2017) specifically shows the impact of career progressions during economic recessions and expansions on low-wage workers. Wile (2017) found that during economic expansions, 1.21% of workers progress up the corporate ladder as compared to only 0.73% during economic recessions. This is a decline of 40%.

**Transition and summary of Section 1.** The literature review studied five key areas relevant to this study. The first section discussed leadership development programs by reviewing the function itself, the success factors, and the current literature around the failure of such programs. The literature review continued with a review of the delayed retirement of Baby Boomers, and the career progression expectations of Generation X and Millennials. Thirdly, the literature review studied leadership transitions, and the research related to making an impact when in a new role along with the research around successful and unsuccessful leadership transitions. Next, the literature explored individual contributors and people leaders. The literature review concluded by looking at recent scholarly information regarding the impact of changing economic cycles on promotions, career progressions, and leadership transitions. The general problem to be addressed is the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with

promotions and career progressions which result in lower employee engagement and lower team performance. In Section 2, the research regarding this phenomenon will be investigated.

## Section 2: The Project

This section described the approach and methodology used to research the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with promotions and career progressions which result in lower employee engagement and lower team performance. Specifically, researching the failure of emerging leaders to shift their thinking and behaviors from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset. This section defined the role of the researcher, the participants, the method and design, the population and sampling, along with the data collection and analysis process for this study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study will add to the body of knowledge regarding leadership transitions by identify the factors present when leadership transitions fail due to an individual contributor mindset versus a people leader mindset. The study also explored the impact to organizational and team performance resulting from effective and ineffective leadership transitions. This phenomenon explored through in-depth interviews with for-profit and nonprofit leaders located in the recession hit region of Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia. This area of the United States has been greatly impacted by The Great Recession of 2008. Dalton, Georgia, in Northwest Georgia, had an average unemployment rate of 4.5% in 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). In 2009, the average unemployment rate reached 12.8%. In 2017, the unemployment rate in Dalton, Georgia improved to 5.7%. Chattanooga, Tennessee, in Southeast Tennessee, had an average unemployment rate of 4.1% in 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). In 2009, the average unemployment rate reached 9.5%. In 2017, the unemployment rate in Chattanooga, Tennessee improved to 3.9%. These two areas have experienced significant hardship and are

gradually emerging from The Great Recession. The ability to have successful leadership transitions, career progressions, and career promotions in these areas is pivotal to the future economic development of the region as many Baby Boomers can now afford to retire as the economy in these areas has improved making way for a new generation of leaders.

Many organizations are experiencing a gap in leadership pipelines due to the lingering effects of The Great Recession where older workers stayed in the workplace longer than in previous time periods. As these workers stayed in jobs longer than in other time periods, the promise of promotions and career progressions was lost on a large population of workers. This phenomenon, coupled with low budgets for leadership development programs, has created a scenario today where emerging leaders are less prepared to lead.

**Role of the researcher.** The role of the researcher in a qualitative phenomenological study is to understand what participants have experienced. The phenomenon of this study are the factors present when leadership transitions fail. Attributes of a qualitative research method includes gathering multiple perspectives and contrasting different views of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). According to Stake (2010), important characteristics of a qualitative study include interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic. Researchers of phenomenological design study the commonality of the experience as participants share a lived reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) described phenomenology as being closely tied to philosophy. The phenomenological design draws on what the participants have in common (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

According to a study by Prion and Adamson (2014), qualitative research design requires a structured approach to data gathering that creates an auditable process. Interviewing will be the main tool to research the impact to an organization when an individual has not effectively

transitioned from the mindset of an individual contributor to the mindset of a people leader. To collect data in a phenomenological study, the researcher will interview the people who are experiencing the reality, concept, or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to understand what has been experienced and how the participants in the study have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Groenewald (2004), “the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (p. 44).

The interview stage of this phenomenological research is specifically designed not to be leading, but to discover with the participant where the interview will lead (Rawat, 2016). The method to analyze data included methods of preparation, methods of collecting data, and methods of organizing and analyzing data (Moustakas, 2011). The researcher will gather the transcribed interview content and identify each comment that is relevant to the question. The comments will then be categorized and grouped into themes. Each theme will then be used to describe the experience and findings.

**Participants.** According to Moustakas (2011), a participant must have experienced the phenomenon, have an interest in the study, is willing to participate, gives permission to be interviewed, and to have data published. This study was based on in-depth interviews with 6 to 10 leaders in the Northeast Georgia and Southeast Tennessee region (the researcher may expand the number of participants based on the depth of the interviews to adequately capture the essence of the phenomenon). An in-depth interview included personal one-on-one primary interview questions and follow-up or probing questions. According to Rawat (2016), there are certain guidelines for in-depth interviews associated with phenomenological research. The interview guidelines include acknowledging that neither the participant nor the researcher fully know

where the interview will lead (Rawat, 2016). The focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but how the participants experiences the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016). A qualitative study is field oriented emphasizing observations by participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological design is the experience or the reality of participants as they journey through a phenomenon. According to Moustakas (2011), the ethical standards followed in this study include the establishment of a two-way agreement between the researcher and the participant defining confidentiality and consent to participate. Each participant received a consent form along with a summary of the literature review and interview questions prior to the interview.

The participants were selected for their specific leadership roles and experience. The researcher and the participants have a general working relationship from previous personal or professional settings. A brief profile of six of the participants who scored higher than a 15 in the Participant Evaluation Rubric in Appendix C include:

***Participant Lorenzo.*** An experienced leader of a very large non-profit organization with significant work experience in Georgia. Current experience in building leadership talent on a national and global scale working for a high-profile subject matter expert in the field of leadership.

***Participant Barry.*** An experienced leader of a large church located in Tennessee with more than 10 years of experience leading volunteers.

***Participant Andrea.*** A staff member of a private University with a student population of more than 4,000 located in Tennessee.

***Participant Jerry.*** An experienced leader of a large church denomination responsible for educational curriculum located in Tennessee.

***Participant Erin.*** A middle school teacher with more than 10 years of experience working in both Georgia and Tennessee.

***Participant Fernand.*** A department leader of a large insurance company located in Tennessee with more than 20 years of experience leading people.

## **Research Method and Design**

The research method chosen for this study was qualitative and not quantitative. Qualitative and quantitative studies are two different methods or approaches for researchers (Creswell, 2016). In this study, the researcher was interested in understanding at a deep level the experiences the participants had with leadership transitions, individual contributor mindsets, people leader mindsets, leadership transition failures, leadership transition successes, and the impact of recessionary times on career promotions. The outcome of this study depended upon the participants' experiences. The outcome was unknown. Qualitative research is described as an exploration where the journey or destination is not known (Creswell, 2016). The method of this research was best using a qualitative approach. A quantitative research approach would be best described as rigid or fixed where the process does not change and is known in advance (Creswell, 2016). The nature of the research was a qualitative phenomenological study. A qualitative research method was selected because "at the heart of qualitative research is a central phenomenon we wish to explore" (Creswell, 2016, p. 6). The phenomenon in this study was to explore the factors present when leadership transitions fail focusing on the transition from individual contributor to a people leader. Attributes of a qualitative research method includes gathering multiple perspectives and contrasting different views of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2016).

**Discussion of method.** There are different methods that could have been selected for this qualitative research project. First, a qualitative method was selected as opposed to a quantitative method. In comparing and contrasting a qualitative method from a quantitative method, it is important to know the difference in explanation versus understanding, and personal role versus impersonal role (Stake, 2010). According to Stake (2010), important characteristics of a qualitative study include interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic. A qualitative study is field oriented, emphasizing observations by participants.

A characteristic that distinguishes a qualitative study from a quantitative study is the researcher's influence on the study. In a qualitative study the participants drive the outcome as compared to a quantitative study that is guided mostly from the view of the researcher (Creswell, 2016). The researcher's views are less evident in quantitative research whereas in qualitative research, the researcher's remarks and bias are present (Creswell, 2016). In this study, the role of the researcher was explicit, and the researcher's comments were identified for the reader.

Another distinguishing characteristic between qualitative and quantitative research is the data collection method. The data collection method in qualitative research methods is open-ended and more interview based (Creswell, 2016). A data collection method in quantitative research is closed-ended with predetermined scales, measures, and other criteria (Creswell, 2016). Interviewing was the primary approach for data collection in this research.

According to Stake (2010), the essence of the qualitative approach is "interpretive, experience based, situational, and personalistic" (p. 31). To conduct an appropriate qualitative research that was personal and situational, triangulation was an important aspect to this study. A qualitative research method should be well triangulated (Stake, 2010). Triangulation is the process of probing to determine the meaning of participant's comments (Stake, 2010).

Triangulation helps determine if the researcher has the meaning right or if more discovery is needed from the participants (Stake, 2010).

This study was based on in-depth interviews with up to 10 leaders in the Northwest Georgia and Southeast Tennessee region. According to Rawat (2016), there are certain guidelines for in-depth interviews associated with phenomenological research. The interview guidelines include acknowledging that neither the participant nor the researcher fully know where the interview will lead (Rawat, 2016). The focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but to understand how the participants experience the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016).

**Discussion of design.** This design was a qualitative phenomenological study. The definition of phenomenological research is to study the “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of the phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). There is an epistemological philosophical assumption behind phenomenological research in that the researcher attempts to draw close to the participants in the study to know what they know (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). The type of phenomenological research in this study was hermeneutical phenomenology. Hermeneutical phenomenology is focused on the lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study used the Moustakas (1994) approach to analyzing data. A challenge in phenomenological research is the declared intent of the researcher’s views and how his or her views will impact the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Summary of research method and design.** A qualitative phenomenological approach was appropriate to the problem studied and the purpose of the study. This approach and methodology was used to understand the experiences of the participants as they provided detailed information concerning the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with

promotions and career progressions which resulted in lower employee engagement and lower team performance. The participants specifically described their experience with understanding the failure of emerging leaders to shift their thinking and behaviors from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset.

### Population and Sampling

As depicted in Table 1, according to the researcher, the participants were selected for their leadership experience, people leadership, passion for leadership, and/or interest in this study. An important step is finding participants and developing a relationship so that the appropriate data can be gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The idea behind phenomenological qualitative research is to examine a phenomenon in depth (Creswell, 2016). In this study, the six participants were selected because of their broad and deep knowledge of leadership transitions.

Table 1 Participants

#### *Participants*

Participant	Leadership Experience	Leader of People	Passion for Leadership	Interest in this study
Participant Andrea	X	X	X	X
Participant Erin	X	X	X	X
Participant Fernand	X	X	X	X
Participant Lorenzo	X	X	X	X
Participant Barry	X	X	X	X
Participant Jerry	X	X	X	X

**Discussion of population.** A purposeful sampling method is best used when selecting participants because they can purposefully address the research problem and leadership transition phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling is different from sampling used in

quantitative studies. In quantitative studies, participants are mostly chosen because they are representative of a population (Creswell, 2016). Using purposeful sampling, the researcher will “intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). The steps in the qualitative purposeful population and sampling strategy include: determining the participants, deciding on the type of sampling method, and deciding on the number of participants (Creswell, 2016).

Due to the ongoing challenge with leadership development programs and the high failure rate of leadership transitions, this study required exploring the topic in more detail and with a greater degree of insight. This study was based on in-depth interviews with up to 10 leaders in the Northwest Georgia and Southeast Tennessee region. According to Rawat (2016), there are certain guidelines for in-depth interviews associated with phenomenological research. The interview guidelines included acknowledging that neither the participant nor the researcher fully know where the interview would lead (Rawat, 2016). The focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but to understand how the participants experience the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016).

**Discussion of sampling.** In this study, the participants were selected because of their expertise in leadership and their personal experience with the phenomenon. The specific purposeful sampling strategy used in this study was a homogenous sampling strategy. The purpose of a homogenous sampling strategy is to focus and simplify the interviewing process of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2016).

A homogeneous purposeful sampling strategy is the best sampling strategy to help answer the research questions. Purposeful sampling is a primary tool used in qualitative research to reveal information-rich information related to the phenomenon of leadership transitions

(Palinkas et al., 2015). Each participant should be able to effectively communicate the lived experience and share their experience in a well-articulated and engaging manner (Palinkas et al., 2015). This sampling strategy reflects the conceptual framework and research questions. This sampling strategy is also able to generate a robust database and draw credible information.

**Summary of population and sampling.** The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study will add to the body of knowledge regarding leadership transitions by identify the factors present when leadership transitions fail due to an individual contributor mindset versus a people leader mindset. The study also explored the impact to organizational and team performance resulting from effective and ineffective leadership transitions. This phenomenon was explored through in-depth interviews. In this research, the participants provided similar information which supported the homogenous sampling strategy. The method for gathering data was interviewing. The researcher carefully considered the experience of the participants to provide credibility to the number of participants in this study. The depth of the experience of each of the participants provided robust triangulated data to explore the phenomenon.

## **Data Collection**

This section discussed the researcher as an instrument of the study and the interview questions and process. Each interview question was cross-referenced with the research questions and problem statement. The complete interview guide is in the appendix. Each interview question is accompanied by clarifying questions and probing questions in Table 2. The main technique used to collect data was interviewing.

## Instruments

Qualitative research is more than “merely a modification of quantitative research” (Xu & Storr, 2012, p. 1). The main instrument in qualitative research is humans (Stake, 2010). Humans plan the research, observe and interview humans, and humans collect data (Stake, 2010). The researcher is an instrument of the study. According to Xu and Storr (2012), “learning how the researcher plays a central role in generating and interpreting data in qualitative research assists neophyte qualitative researchers in understanding the complexity inherent in qualitative research” (p. 1). Interviewing was the primary approach for data collection in this research.

The following table reflects the primary interview questions, clarifying questions, and probing questions in relationship to the research questions and problem statement. Refer to the appendix to view the complete interview guide.

Table 2. Interview Questions

### *Interview Questions*

	Primary Interview Question	Clarifying questions and probing questions	Research Questions (RQ)				Problem Statement Element (PSE)				
			1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
1	How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	What are key characteristics that make a successful individual contributor? What are key characteristics that make a successful people leader?	X			X					
2	What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	How did this impact you, the team, and your goals? Have you been a people leader with an individual contributor mindset? What did you learn?		X				X		X	
3	Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	In your experience, what is needed for this transition to be successful? In your experience, do you see more failed leadership transitions or successful leadership transitions? Why?			X		X			X	
4	Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	Why is the failure rate of leadership development programs high? Is there too much focus on developing people leaders when the future could be more about high performing individual			X	X	X				

Primary Interview Question	Clarifying questions and probing questions	Research Questions (RQ)				Problem Statement Element (PSE)				
		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
	contributors with the Gig Economy (Uber, etc.)?									
5	What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?		X	X	X		X	X	X	
6	People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to your personally?			X			X	X		
7	Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	X								X

The chart in Table 2 above is designed to link each interview question and clarifying question to the research questions and the problem statement to assure the research questions and problem statement are clearly covered during each interview. The bullet points below provide a description of each research question and problem statement. The problem statement has been grouped in to five elements. Each interview question and clarifying question in Table 2 has been validated by cross-referencing to the research question and problem statement. Each question comes from literature review in Section 1 of this study.

- RQ1. What is the impact to organizational effectiveness and performance when an individual in a people leadership role performs as an individual contributor?
- RQ2. What are the critical success factors of individuals transitioning from individual contributor to people leader?

- RQ3. What are common failures for individual contributors transitioning to become a people leader?
- RQ4. What are the characteristics of a successful individual contributor? What are the characteristics of a successful people leader?
- PSE1: High failure rate of leadership transition success in promotions and career progressions. McKeown (2015) found that the failure rate of newly promoted or hired leaders is 40%.
- PSE2: Impact of PSE1 on low employee engagement and low team performance.
- PSE3: Seventy-five percent (75%) of newly promoted leaders report being unprepared for the new assignment (Keller & Meany, 2017).
- PSE4: Leadership transition failure due to an inability to shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset.
- PSE5: The impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

According to Creswell (2016) there are at least three types of interviews: one-on-one interviews, phone or internet interviews, and focus groups. A one-on-one type interview can be the most advantageous as the researcher is able to see body language creating an intimate environment for follow-up questions and sub-questions that can reveal deeper answers (Creswell, 2016). Asking open-ended questions is the way to conduct a meaningful interview (Creswell, 2016). A combination of one-on-one interviews, phone interviews, and Google Hangout interviews were used to collect data from the participants. Prepared follow-up questions and

probing questions were anticipated before each interview to conduct a meaningful and data rich interview.

### **Data Organization Techniques**

Each interview was conducted using the procedures for conducting and preparing interviews outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). This includes using open-ended questions, collecting data using adequate recording procedures, use of interview protocol, obtaining consent, and securing all information appropriately. Software that records interviews and automatically produces transcripts was used along with the researcher's notes during the interview. The participants' identity were not disclosed. Each interview and follow-up interaction was logged and timed. Qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo was used as needed to capture and analyze data.

**Summary of data collection.** Interviewing was the primary approach for data collection in this research. Each interview question was open-ended with clarifying and probing questions anticipated. In qualitative research, the researcher did not know where the study would go. It was the lived experiences of the participants that controlled the study. The integrity of the data collection process and software used to capture and analyze data included cataloging the themes and perceptions of the participants' comments from the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Stake (2010) described analysis as "taking things apart" (p. 133). Analyzing the data obtained from each interview required a detailed approach to transcribing and following-up on each interview questions. The researcher will "take apart" each phrase and word from each interview (Stake, 2010, p. 133). According to Stake (2010), the researcher's goal is to observe, and record details in such a way that the reader can join in the experience of the participants.

The overall data analysis approach for this phenomenological study will follow the modified or simplified method first developed by Moustakas in 1994 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The six-step process first involves disclosing the personal experiences of the researcher with the phenomenon by describing the researcher's connection to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, each interview was reviewed in detail to identify significant statements. Each statement is then grouped into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A description is then developed for what each participant experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the researcher describes the essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A further way to describe the process for identifying significant statements was in the coding process.

### **Coding Process**

According to Creswell (2016), "coding is taking transcribed text data and making sense of them" (p. 152). The first step in the coding process is to develop a text database of all interviews (Creswell, 2016). Coding began after the transcripts from each interview had been reviewed and edited for accuracy. The coding process involves assigning a label or code to the text (Creswell, 2016). After assigning labels, the labeled text was grouped into themes. Each theme created the story the researcher planned to tell. Table 3 describes the process for converting raw text into codes and then themes. Table 4 provides an example of a template to structure codes, interview transcripts, and themes. NVivo 12 software was used to code text.

Table 3. Process from Raw Text to Codes to Themes

*Process from Raw Text to Codes to Themes*

Step 1	Create text data base
Step 2	Complete rigorous review of data
Step 3	Divide text into data segments
Step 4	Label segments with codes
Step 5	Reduce conflicts
Step 6	Group codes into themes

Table 4. Coding and Theme Template

*Coding and Theme Template*

<b>Codes:</b>	<b>Interview transcript:</b>	<b>Themes:</b>
<b>Code A</b>	Text 1	Theme 101
<b>Code F</b>	Text 10	Theme 102

The following labels or codes were initially be used to categorize the interview data: individual contributor mindset (ICM), people leader mindset (PLM), individual contributor success factors (ICSF), people leader success factors (PLSF), working for an individual contributor (WIC), impact of individual contributor leadership of people (ICLP), leadership transition challenges (LTC), leadership transition success factors (LTSF), leadership transition failure (LTF), leadership development failure (LDF), leadership development success (LDS), individual contributor (IC), transitioning to people leader (TPL), unprepared leaders (UPL), factors that could help with preparation for new role (PNR), leadership transition and recessions (LTR), and long-term impact of cycle (unprepared leaders) (LTIM). The researcher used Table 3 and Table 4 as the templates for coding. This was how each label or code were coded, and how

documentation were maintained for repeatability of this study. The following rubric was used to evaluate a participant's response.

Table 5. Evaluation Rubric

*Evaluation Rubric*

Primary Interview Question	Participant Alias:	Codes	Quality of Response to Study			Score
			Low (-1)	Med (+1)	High (+3)	
How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?		ICM PLM ICSF PLSF	Concept was not familiar	Able to describe concept	Response shows an in-depth knowledge of the two mindsets	
What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?		ICM WIC ICLP	No experience	Provided some examples	Response clearly reflects a lived experience	
Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?		LTC LTSF LTF	Limited understanding of leadership transitions	Understands the concept of leadership transitions	Response reflects an in-depth understanding of leadership transitions challenges	
Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?		LDS IC	Little to no participation in leadership development programs	Some experience with leadership development	Has participated in developing leadership development programs	
What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?		TPL	No experience	Can describe some traps	Articulates well an understanding of traps	
People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?		UPL PNR	Did not reflect being unprepared for a role	Has examples of being unprepared	A robust understanding and experience with the impact of being unprepared	
Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?		LTR LTIM	Does not reflect a correlation between economic cycles and leadership transitions	Can articulate a correlation	Has specific examples of economic cycles and leadership	
Overall Score						

**Summary of data analysis.** According to Creswell and Poth (2018), it is important that the researcher does not side with the participant by documenting only the comments that might be viewed as favorable. The researcher should also report and probe for multiple perspectives and unfavorable comments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is also required to respect the security

and privacy of each participant in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, aliases were used when referring to participants in the study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

According to Creswell (2016), in qualitative research, the researcher interprets the data and information collected through his or her personal filter. In light of the personal interpretation of qualitative research, the researcher must conduct reliability and validity checks (Creswell, 2016). In a qualitative phenomenological study, validity is supported when an idea is “well-grounded and well supported” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 271).

**Reliability.** To check for the accuracy of the lived experience, the researcher will triangulate the findings by building evidence from multiple interview sources (Creswell, 2016). Reliability was also checked by adherence to the interview guide and interview protocol. A risk to this study was knowing when saturation had been achieved by the correct quantity of participants. The researcher followed various saturation protocols to know if the interview pool should be expanded. Saturation protocols in this study included probing. Probing will continue until an in-depth understanding of the participant’s view has been reached (Creswell, 2016). As previously referenced, additional saturation protocols included the coding and identification of themes from each interview. For example, could new codes or new themes be developed from the interview transcriptions? (Creswell, 2016). Evidence was provided that saturation had been reached.

**Validity.** There are a series of questions a researcher should ask himself or herself when conducting a qualitative phenomenological study to assess validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Did the researcher sway the participants in so much as the comments do not reflect the participants’ views? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Did the researcher transcribe the interviews

accurately, and does the transcription truly reflect the meaning of each interview? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Has the researcher included other alternative conclusions beyond what he or she would conclude? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Could someone rebuild the researcher's study and conclusions from the data collected and have similar conclusions regarding the lived experiences of the participants? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Is the phenomenon to study clear? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To further validate the research, each interview will adhere to the same protocol for consistency of the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Summary of reliability and validity.** Reliability and validity are important to qualitative studies because the nature of qualitative research is extremely interpretive with themes and conclusions developed by the researcher (Creswell, 2016). To achieve reliability and validity in this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher will spend considerable time reviewing the interview transcripts along with clarifying any biases of the researcher through reflexivity (Creswell, 2016). According to Creswell (2016), "Write yourself into the qualitative study by reflexively commenting on your personal experiences with the phenomenon and how your experiences have shaped the development of your qualitative project" (p. 223).

**Transition and summary of Section 2.** In Section 2, the approach and methodology used to conduct the phenomenological research regarding the high failure rate of leadership was discussed. Section 2 defined the role of the researcher, the participants, the method and design, the population and sampling, along with the data collection and analysis process for this study. In Section 3, the conclusions and findings of the research and interviews is presented. Section 3 also addresses the application to professional practice along with recommendations for action and further study.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Section 3 included an overview of the study, the participant evaluation rubric results, a summary of each interview, and concluded with themes and findings. Section 3 also summarized the results of the findings for relevance to professional practice and recommended actions. Finally, Section 3 created a bridge for researchers to continue the research by suggesting recommendations for further study. It is important for the reader to know that the focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but to understand how the participants experience the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016).

#### **Overview of the Study**

Despite the efforts of many leadership development programs, more than 80% of new leaders transitioning into the first role as a leader fail to make a successful transition (Korn Ferry Leadership Principles, 2018). According to Custovic and Insaurralde (2016), many leaders are not prepared for career progressions or leadership transitions because they may have been successful as individual contributors but struggle in roles where they are required to lead others. The general problem that was addressed is the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with promotions and career progressions which result in lower employee engagement and lower team performance. Keller and Meany (2017) found that 75% of newly promoted leaders report being unprepared for the new assignment. McKeown (2015) found that the failure rate of newly promoted or hired leaders is 40%. The specific problem that was addressed was that a leader's failure to shift his or her thinking and behaviors from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset could be a contributor to the high rate of leadership failure in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations in Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia, two regions that have emerged from The Great Recession of 2008. According to Adams (March

2017), since the recession, many boards have focused less on executive transitions and leadership development. Tiffan (2009) found that individual contributors achieve success through a mindset that thrives on individual drive and effort. Dawson (2016) found a people leader is recognized for his or her ability to create an atmosphere that motives team members to succeed.

Due to the ongoing challenge with leadership development programs and the high failure rate of leadership transitions, this study required exploring the topic in more detail and with a greater degree of insight. This study was based on in-depth interviews with 6 to 10 leaders in the Northwest Georgia and Southeast Tennessee region. The general problem that was addressed was the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with promotions and career progressions which result in lower employee engagement and lower team performance.

According to Rawat (2016), there are certain guidelines for in-depth interviews associated with phenomenological research. The interview guidelines include acknowledging that neither the participant nor the researcher fully know where the interview will lead (Rawat, 2016). As a reminder, the focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but to understand how the participants experience the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016). After each interview, the researcher compiled the Participant Evaluation Rubric results found in Appendix C. A score of 21 is the highest score reflecting the participants' ability to share specific examples of the lived experience of the phenomenon and general understanding of the questions. A participant who scored below a 15 was excluded from the findings. The participant names are aliases to protect the identity of the actual participant.

Table 6. Summary Participant Evaluation Rubric Results

*Summary Participant Evaluation Rubric Results*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>Barry</b>	21
<b>Lorenzo</b>	21
<b>Fernand</b>	16
<b>Erin</b>	18
<b>Andrea</b>	19
<b>Jerry</b>	21

**Anticipated Themes/Perceptions**

Anticipated themes and perceptions included each participant being able to accurately share one or more specific experiences of working for someone who was in a position to lead people but executed the role with an individual contributor mindset. As a result, each of the six participants were able to share a significant personal experience as described in the findings. The researcher also noted that each of the personal experiences were described with passion, detail, and a sense of frustration. Additionally, it was anticipated that the participants would be able to accurately define the difference in an individual contributor mindset and a people leader mindset. Furthermore, it was expected that the definition between the participants were similar. The results of each interview clearly revealed a similar understanding by each participant supporting triangulation and saturation.

According to Groenewald (2004) “the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (p. 44). There are a series of questions a researcher should ask himself or herself when

conducting a qualitative phenomenological study to assess validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Did the researcher sway the participants in so much as the comments do not reflect the participants' views? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Did the researcher transcribe the interviews accurately, and does the transcription truly reflect the meaning of each interview? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Has the researcher included other alternative conclusions beyond what he or she would conclude? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A key probing question the researcher asked in each interview, to further seek alternative conclusions and to provide evidence of reliability and validation, was to ask each participant if, from their experience, the high failure rate of leadership transitions and leadership development programs seemed accurate—too high or too low, and why? Half of the participants agreed that from their experience the failure rate of both leadership transition and leadership development programs was high.

Lorenzo said,

I would not say the 40 percent is too high. This is my experience working with a lot of business owners. When I ask what the biggest challenge is, they all say finding good people is the biggest challenge. What I feel like has happen with the economic boom of the last couple of years as companies have expanded at such a rapid pace, they have had to more quickly move people into leadership positions. And maybe the people have not been vetted as well, maybe they have not been prepared as well, maybe they mistakenly put people in roles because solid past performance. When promotions happen more quickly, failure can happen more quickly. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

The other half of the participants shared mixed experiences usually expressing views that the right job or role fit was also an important factor along with a recognition that all

transitions in life are difficult and influenced by many factors. All of the participants shared very specific experiences where leaders who have a “me” perspective versus a “we” perspective significantly contributed to lower employee engagement and low team performance.

## Presentation of the Findings

**Describing an individual contributor and people leader (Question 1).** The opening question in each interview started with asking each participant to define or describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leader mindset. Follow-up questions included asking each participant to describe the characteristics of a successful individual contributor and successful people leader. Table 7 reflects the findings of these questions.

Table 7. Defining Individual Contributor and People Leader

### *Defining Individual Contributor and People Leader*

Individual Contributor	People Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Me” orientation</li> <li>• “I” orientation</li> <li>• Out for what benefits me</li> <li>• Measured by what I can do</li> <li>• Task oriented</li> <li>• Faithful to complete a task</li> <li>• May be shortsighted by not considering the enterprise</li> <li>• May place personal vision over organizational vision</li> <li>• May resist communicating or interacting outside of his or her own area of responsibility</li> <li>• Still expected to have a team mindset</li> <li>• Still expected to help the team be efficient</li> <li>• Self-motivated to complete a task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We” oriented</li> <li>• “We” accomplish</li> <li>• Measured by what I can do through others</li> <li>• Concerned with enhancing the whole not just the individual role or area of responsibility</li> <li>• Complements the whole enterprise</li> <li>• Expresses a curiosity with how the whole enterprise works</li> <li>• Communicates with others well to understand connection points and how his or her team enhances other people’s areas of responsibility</li> <li>• Team minded and has an ability to influence others</li> <li>• Looks through the lens of humility</li> </ul>

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knows what is expected</li> <li>• Able to work autonomously</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to motivate, engage, and interact with others</li> <li>• Self-motivated towards relationship building</li> <li>• Approachable</li> <li>• Servant leader</li> <li>• Respected and able to gain loyalty from others</li> </ul> |
|---|--|
- 

Significant quotes related to describing individual contributors and people leaders are as follows:

- “The me oriented individual contributor is looking at how he or she can marshal his or her skills, how they can utilize their time, how they can take advantage of their talents an opportunity” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019).
- The people leader mindset is focused on how can I take advantage of the skills of my team, the time, the talent of my team, how can I maximize their efforts and coalesce the whole thing that in the end we achieve something significant.  
(Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)
- “An individual contributor is focused more on their individual success rather than the success of a group, team, department or organization” (Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019).
- “A people leader will know that the success of the whole organization will help the success of his or her own team” (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

- “It is great if an individual contributor does not want direct reports, but I still look for them to explore leadership and be thinking for the whole team with more of a team mindset” (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019).
- “Even though an individual contributor may be individually minded, a corporation is not” (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019).
- I need someone to learn the job, motivate individuals, and interact and talk with their teams. People leaders need to be interested in impacting lives and developing people—which takes a lot of time. I have had some very bad managers, and all they did was manage they did not lead. (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019)
- “You need a servant’s heart to lead people” (Participant Erin, June 6, 2019).
- In my work, a people leader needs to be approachable. A couple different people come to mind. One person, when you go to her, she will help you. The other person, you just stop going to her because she reacts negatively every time you ask for help. A people leader must be approachable when you have a problem. (Participant Andrea, personal communication, June 6, 2019)

From the interviews, a proposed definition of an individual contributor is as follows. An individual contributor is task driven with single accountability for results who excels at driving a task to completion, but also may be blind to seeing and supporting the greater purpose of the whole enterprise. Also, from the interviews, a proposed definition of a people leader is as follows. A people leader is driven by humility, relationships, and effective communication to uncover the talents of his or her team to drive results for the whole enterprise. The responses to Question 1 revealed a common understanding of the difference between an individual contributor

and a people leader between each participant which created a strong baseline understanding as the participants addressed the remainder of the interview questions.

**Leading with an individual contributor mindset and team impact (Question 2).** A major focus of each interview was to take a deeper look at the participants experience observing or personal experience being led by someone with an individual contributor mindset, and the impact of this leadership approach. Based on the interviews, an effective people leader will spend time with the team, focus on team building, be visible with the team, engage in team collaboration, and creating unity. In contrast, a leader with an individual contributor mindset will be absent, not-visible, stop engaging, appear closed-off from others, and no longer provide help. The biggest impact to the engagement and performance of a team is the loss of trust when this happens.

Participant Andrea shared her experience working for a person with an individual contributor mindset. Andrea shares how this person was promoted from an individual contributor role to a people leadership role, but never made the leadership transition to a people leader. Andrea recounted how her leader is very vocal regarding her dislike of her new role and the dislike of the people-side of the job. According to Andrea, the entire department knows she should have never been promoted to this role. The impact to the team is demoralizing per Andrea. The team has lost hope and confidence. Andrea said her leader is open to hearing ideas as long as it does not require work from her. As a result, the team has stopped bringing ideas and innovation forward. This has squelched creativity on the team. Andrea began to discuss person-role-fit as another concern.

Participant Erin shared her first-hand experience from more than 20 years working either full-time or part-time as an educator in a middle school. Erin sees people leadership as a

requirement for teachers where the team is the students. Erin shared many examples of teachers approaching their job with the “me-only” mindset. According to Erin, a key insight is the idea of self-evaluations and or testing to determine the likelihood of leadership transition success.

Participant Fernand shared a very specific situation where a manager is singling out someone on the team by overworking the individual. According to Fernand, “This manager cares more about the work than the individual team member” (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019). The impact to the team is high turnover as team members become burned-out. According to Fernand, “without relationship you can’t be a leader” (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019).

Participant Barry shared how an organization is saddled with unhealthy competition between departments and teams when each team leader operates with an individual contributor or “me” mindset. This creates an environment where each department or team fights against each other for resources and attention. The leader then begins to ramrod his or her agenda. According to Barry, “People leaders with individual contributor mindsets create division in the broader context of the organization instead of unity” (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019). “I have had to work with someone that it was all about them and not about the whole, it does cause division in the long-run” (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

Participant Jerry quickly responded with “I have seen it” (Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 3, 2019). Jerry’s experience found that people think the same set of skills that made them successful as an individual contributor is the same set of skills that will make them successful in the new role as a people leader. According to Jerry, a completely different set of skills may be required. Jerry shared how the team he was a part of began to feel like all we

were here to do is make the leader successful instead of the team. Another dynamic Jerry expressed was when he worked with a younger team, and he experienced generation skill intimidation.

Jerry said,

For me, when I started working with a younger team, I was a little intimidated, they were sharp and resourceful. I thought I was seen as a strong leader and innovator at one point in my career. This was a real leadership transition time for me personally. I had made the transition to accepting, but not embracing. I finally worked through that and truly got to the point that rather than feel bad or intimidated, I began to think about the bigger picture, and how I would fit in this new dynamic. But there are times when I still say to myself, well they did better than I did. I then started to change my mental model by seeing these younger talented leaders launching from my shoulders to go even further than I could go. I now say to myself that I am glad to just be a part of it. It was more than a mindset shift for me, my leadership transition had to also be a heart shift.

(Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

Participant Lorenzo shared a personal experience where his boss started the role as an effective people leader with all of the right characteristics, but then shifted to an individual contributor mindset after the pressure and expectations of leadership became more intense.

When you are leading people, when more and more pressure ratchets up, the more your own personal battles, challenges, and weaknesses come to the forefront. The more you have to succeed at a higher level, the more you have to step into a closet with your own issues and battle them. The areas of your life that are weak or need development or

growth or maybe even insecurity will become more and more evident in your life and you have to face them. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

The response to Question 2 shows a clear lived experience by each participant from either working for or working with a person responsible to lead people having an individual contributor mindset. The biggest impact to the engagement and performance of a team is the loss of trust when this happens.

**Why leadership transition is so difficult and what is needed (Question 3).** The participants were asked to share why they believed the leadership transition was difficult, and what might be needed to improve the success rate of leadership transitions. Lorenzo articulated a reason leadership transitions are difficult in such a unique way that it is important to share verbatim from the interview transcript.

I am going to make a distinction; I think any transition can be difficult. There can be failure going from known to unknown, going from familiar to unfamiliar, going from great relationships to no relationships, anytime there is a transition it is difficult. It is like when you go rappelling, the thing that is difficult is transitioning from standing on top of the mountain to hanging on the side of the mountain. It felt weird to lay your head back, you did not know the system or process for rappelling, but once you got to where you were perpendicular to the cliff face, the system seemed to work and you zipped down having fun. Leadership transition or any transition is very difficult, and the system from going from one to the other, the learning phase, the adjusting phase, is difficult for anyone. All the more so, if you are transitioning from an individual contributor to a people leader. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

When each participant was asked what is needed for the transition from an individual contributor to a people leader to be successful. The participants suggested that some form of testing or self-evaluation to first identify a person's readiness or capability to move from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset was needed. In addition to a type of readiness evaluation, dedicating meaningful time to mentoring and coaching was needed. The participants also identified a lack of leaders understanding expectations. It was suggested training could focus more on how to draft clear expectations and track progress on meeting expectations.

Each participant also expressed an opinion that the idea that everyone is a leader has led to failed transitions and the poor selection of candidates to attend leadership development training. According to the participants, not everyone is a leader—and that is okay. Jerry said it this way,

Based on what I have seen, if the failure rate was 50 percent it would not have surprised me. Again, what I see is people who are very successful in what might be called their sweet spot, and then, all of a sudden, find themselves in a different role which is not their sweet spot and they are like a fish out of water, and it is not a pretty sight. (Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

Other factors that are needed for successful leadership transitions include moving away from the idea of development towards more of a radical role shift or transformation. As an example, Lorenzo expressed a need to better identify who might have the potential to lead others by suggesting stretch assignments on volunteer teams as a good predictor of people leadership potential. “It is one thing to lead people who rely on you for a paycheck and it is another thing to lead volunteers” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

We see it all the time, how many star players turned out to be terrible coaches. And then the mediocre player turned out to be the best coach. And why is this? I think it could be in part because someone who can find the extra gear in themselves, may not be the person who can help someone else find the extra gear. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

Barry expressed that “we have to be careful not to throw people in the deep end of the pool if they can’t swim” (Participant Barry, June 3, 2019). Fernand shared how the profile or makeup of the team was a contributor to a leader’s success.

A lot of times, we have a manager leave, and we do a month’s worth of interviews, hire someone, and then put them in charge of a team. Everyone then gets busy, and we don’t take time to transition people correctly. These new leaders struggle if they are faced with several challenges in the first several weeks. Challenges like managing under performers all at the same time while receiving customer complaints. If there is a mentor, we don’t stick to the mentor program long enough to make a real difference. (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019)

The response to Question 3 revealed several challenges with leadership transitions: lack of mentorship, lack of time, and poor candidate selection.

**Are leadership development programs failing? (Question 4).** With more than 80% of new leaders transitioning into the first role as a leader failing to make a successful transition (Korn Ferry Leadership Principles, 2018), with 75% of newly promoted leaders reporting being unprepared for new assignments (Keller & Meany, 2017), with many boards focusing less on executive transitions and leadership development since The Great Recession of 2008 (Adams, 2017), the effectiveness of leadership development programs is in question. Interview question 4

focused on understanding the participants experience with leadership development programs and the challenges or phenomenon described above.

Pinning the failure of leadership transitions solely on failed leadership development programs may be painting with a broad brush. According to Lorenzo,

I want to push back on the failure of leadership development programs. Just to say that leadership development programs have failed is somewhat a broad brush. Because what may have failed is that we have not adequately prepared someone who is currently an individual contributor for a leadership role by helping them understand the difference between an individual contributor and a people leader. Secondly, there may be a failure in actually identifying if this person is able to move from individual contributor to people leader. So, no amount of leadership development will work. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

Many of the participants described the importance of relationships when transitioning from an individual contributor to a people leader.

I am convinced that one of the first ways that people have failed from transitioning from an individual contributor to a people leader is that they have failed to really build relationships with the team first. If you go to the performance step and forget the people step, you can fail. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

Jerry also expressed “helping people look at things from a relationship perspective not just a tactical or numbers perspective” (Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019).

Fernand said it this way, “Without relationship you can’t be a leader” (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019). The idea that people leaders need to be self-motivated

to engage in relationships early in the transition to a new leadership role was an important theme from the interviews.

Barry shared a personal experience participating in a recent leadership development program.

For me, the fact that my organization sent me to training made me feel like I was worth investing in, so it made me take to heart what was being presented in the leadership development training. The big thing I am learning is how to be more self-aware of my strengths, of my leadership style, of the words that I speak, of how speak them, of the tone that I use. I think an initial investment in leadership development to know who you are as a leader so you can help others find out where they are in their journey as a leader is critical. I do think it is valuable if the people receiving the leadership training are willing to receive it. (Participant Barry, June 3, 2019)

Lorenzo shared an opinion that females may be more ready for leadership transitions because females may be more team oriented.

I do believe that developing leadership is as much about heart as it is thinking. I think there has been a failure in recognizing the heart side of leadership. Because of this, I sometimes feel like females, who may be naturally gifted relational leaders, may be better leaders. Males usually are more goal-oriented while women are usually more team-oriented. There is a switch in men where they might say, 'I will run through that wall.' A female might think, 'well what would happen if we all ran through the wall together.' There seems to be an easier, let's just all go do it, for women, where a man might say, I will go do it. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

Question 4 also explored the experience of the participants with leadership programs potentially needing to focus more on developing highly professional individual contributors with the rise of the Gig Economy (Uber, Lyft, home-based businesses, etc.). According to Jerry,

I can see more people being satisfied with what they are doing because they are individual contributors. I think people are sometimes forced to be something they are not or in roles they are not comfortable with or good at. And so why not stay somewhere where your individual contribution makes sense to you and is very gratifying to you.  
(Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

Erin said, “sometimes it may be better to give a high-performing individual contributor a raise and not move them to a people leader role for a promotion” (Participant Erin, personal communication, June 6, 2019).

Barry commented,

There are several task oriented jobs where a well-trained individual contributor who knows how to influence others is needed, but everyone comes out of college or their leadership development training and expect to be the leader of the pack, but not everyone has had the opportunity to be on the playing field for a while to get the experience they might need to be able to in charge of the whole team. They might need to play right field for a little while longer. The culture has shifted to where everyone is expected to be the leader, and nothing gets done. We need people who can be faithful to the task.  
(Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019)

In Lorenzo’s experience, “we live in an era where, because of economic pressure, everyone wants to have a personal side hustle” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019). Lorenzo further shared that from his experience, even if you are an individual

contributor, “if you really want to do something big and significant, you are going to have people and teams.” The responses to Question 4 show a need for organizations to review the effectiveness of leadership development programs. A major finding is the need for employees to take control of their own development.

**Common traps preventing successful leadership transitions (Question 5).** The participants identified 10 common traps, from personal experience, that prevent people from moving from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset.

1. The trap of personal ego and pride
2. The trap of devaluing people
3. The trap of not continuing to learn
4. The trap of overlooking great potential talent
5. The trap of doing it all yourself
6. The trap of little preparation
7. The trap of ignoring the warning signs of behaviors
8. The trap of peer group promotion
9. The trap of past success as an indicator of future success
10. The trap of the absence of vulnerability.

It is a heavy thing to get a promotion. You have a person in higher authority say to you that you are really good. You have proven to me that you are so good, I want you to come in and lead all these people. And usually, you are put in the role because there is some problem. You are told that this team needs improvement and that you are the person to make a real difference. The person trying to hire you is selling the job and blowing up your ego. So, I feel like it is easy to go into a new role or assignment feeling

puffed up and thinking this team better shape up quick. They could be in the way of my next promotion. This puffing up of an ego is no formula that gets you to succeed in leading people. Because, the first thing you have to do is value people. And if you do not value them or if you look down your nose at them and think it's a good thing I am here, you are going to have a serious problem. You will find yourself in a position so far above them that you are too far away to lead them. In my mind, you have to place value on people to lead them well, but if you place value on yourself only and not on them, it could get bad. This doesn't mean you ignore their faults, flaws, or development opportunities. It also does not mean that you become this overly self-deprecating person that is always putting yourself down. We have to really mean that if we succeed it's because you did it, and if we fail, it's because I failed, and I messed it up somehow. In my case, I had come into a new role, coming out of a place of success. I even had people tell me that place chews up leaders and spits them out. I arrogantly said, well they have not met me yet. Previous success can be your friend and your enemy because it can make you think you have it figured out. In reality, if you are in a new role, you have so much to learn. Two traps are arrogance (believing your press clippings) and shutting yourself off from learning (assuming you know it all). Another trap is missing some real gold on your team. People may be great but may have just been poorly led. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

Barry said, "Leaders need to recognize that it is more fun when the team wins than when one individual wins" (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

From Jerry's experience,

A common trap is thinking what made you successful to get to this new role is not what will make you successful in the new role. But also realizing that there may be things that make you successful that you need to keep doing. It is almost like doing a leadership transition stop, start and continue.

Jerry goes on to say that the secret to his leadership transition to an effective people leader is vulnerability. Fernand shared how the lack of real preparation is a trap. The responses to Question 5 reveal a common understanding by the participants of traps that lead to failed leadership transitions.

**Unprepared for the new assignment (Question 6).** Exploring the lived experience of the participants when they were unprepared for a new role was an important aspect of the interviews as 75% of newly promoted leaders report being unprepared for new assignments (Keller & Meany, 2017).

I remember the first week that I was at my first full time job, and I knew all of the skills, I knew the strategies, I knew the systems, I had been a part of all of these things before, but I remember the shock and awe moment when I realized the success and the failures rest on my shoulders. I felt inadequate. I knew what to do, but I had to push through all of my insecurities. Even though I had a mentor. I have talked to others in my field that did not have a mentor, and now they come to me for advice and help on how to handle situations. We have to have people that have been in the trenches for a while, and we have to give avenues for the people that are just getting into new roles by structuring conversations with those who have the experience. We need people who have paved the way. People with experience may not have used the same methods or technology, but they have valuable experience to help prepare others. Having a safety net of someone

who has been down the road before will secure or stabilize the people who are just starting out in new roles or leadership transitions. Having mentors is important.

(Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Fernand mentioned that preparation is a balancing act between technical acumen and leadership acumen. Fernand also describes how a lack of time and being too busy is a real barrier to the people side of leadership. You may not know how to coach your employee on inclusiveness, but you better know how to take the next order.

When I moved to a manager role, I did not go through any technical training at all. All the people I was now leading had the technical knowledge of the job. If I would have had two weeks of technical training, the long-term impact of would have been better as far as speaking with confidence and getting the confidence of my staff. Instead it took eight to nine months and my credibility was a barrier initially. So, being prepared is as much as about how to lead people as it is the technical capabilities of the job itself.

Mentorship is a big factor. Making time for the mentor conversation is critical. We are too busy to spend the right amount of time with people to help them prepare for new assignments or roles. Being too busy is a real issue. (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019)

Jerry mentioned that he would have been better prepared if someone would have guided him.

Erin shared how in teaching, she was assigned a seasoned and experienced teacher for her entire first year. In Andrea's experience, "if you say you are too busy, you sound more important"

(Participant Andrea, personal communication, June 6, 2019). However, Lorenzo shared a unique experience with feeling unprepared.

I don't think feeling unprepared is not all together bad. The person who says they don't feel prepared for a new role or assignment may be confessing that they don't have it all together, and I am not the arrogant overly prepared person. So maybe this is one place where genuine humility is showing up. For many people, there is nothing that can prepare you for something you have never really done. When I took the job I am in now, I was nervous, because there were parts of the job I have never done before. After 30 years of being around leadership, I don't know if I can think of one thing that could of helped me be more prepared except for the understanding and humility that I am not prepared but I know this is what I am supposed to do [sort of like a calling]. Knowing that I am in the right place and in the right job was the most important thing that got me through the tough times. What will almost always lead to success is knowing this is what I am supposed to be doing and I know I am not ready. This is the perfect combination that leads to success – I know this is what I am supposed to be doing, and I know I am not ready to do it. That blend of certainty of what I should do and awareness that I am not ready to do it. This makes the person confident enough to do it and humble enough to prepare well. In a spiritual context, God never calls us to things we can do without Him. So, we should always feel some of being unprepared for a new role. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

The participants' response to Question 6 show reasons why people may feel unprepared for new assignments. This could include a lack of time or a lack of training.

**Potential long-term impact of failed leadership transitions (Question 7).** Each participant was presented the following scenario and asked to share from their experience, what could be a long-term impact that today's organizations may not be anticipating. The scenario is

three-fold. First, the participants were asked to share experiences during economic recessions or budget cuts with leadership development. Second, even with the United States at or near full employment, the delayed retirement of Baby Boomers may have created fewer advancement opportunities for today's younger worker. And third, research suggest that leaders are hard to find, and developing the next generation of leaders is a number one priority for most all organizations.

From Andrea's experience, people should not wait to be trained or developed by their organizations. Andrea has found that there is a plethora of free and credible leadership material readily available. According to Andrea, "personal ownership of leadership development is what is failing" (Participant Andrea, personal communication, June 6, 2019). Erin's comments were similar in that she found that people still do not know who they are. According to Erin, more focus should be on personality test and self-discovery.

Jerry has significant years of experience and works with multiple generations in the workplace. Jerry commented that

In the next probably five to ten years, younger workers will be required to lead others at an earlier stage in their career than previous generations. This phenomenon of not being prepared, leadership transition failure, and leadership development program ineffectiveness will need to become a larger focus of organizations in the near term.

(Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

Jerry also shared that younger Generation X and Millennial workers may have a disposition to a "me" or individual contributor mindset which will make the leadership transition to a people leader more difficult. Jerry has seen younger Generation X and Millennial workers realizing some of their leadership deficiencies. Jerry has discovered that these workers are showing more

respect to him and asking for his advice more and more. Jerry believes, from his experience, that the disposition in the younger Generation X and Millennial workers towards seeking out authentic relationships can be a catalyst to a new place of leadership development in the future if organizations learn how to leverage this properly.

According to Fernand, the recessionary period and frequent budget cuts is taking a toll on leadership.

During the Great Recession of 2008, every department had to cutback 20% year after year. Training was definitely cut. The other side of this is that people complain about individual development, but they do not do anything about developing themselves. It is not always up to where you work to develop you. You have to own your own development. So, if you really want to be developed, you could be developed you just have to own it. My company pays for on-line development, and any employee can go on-line to develop themselves. But the majority of people do not do it. Most of our training on leadership is after-the-fact. Moving forward, leadership development training needs to be more based on interviewing the business on what they struggle with and need so that training can be relevant and make it practicable. (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019)

Barry seemed to articulate a very specific experience with recessionary periods and cutbacks. Barry describes what he views as a recession mindset. According to Barry,

I don't see senior leaders and executives wanting to change as much as they use to in their leadership. As our leaders have aged, younger leaders do not feel like they have the opportunity that the older leaders had. I think The Great Recession had something to do with this. Executives might be less risky and fearful about being an entrepreneur. Not

wanting to do something new but trying to hold on to what they have got. Leaders, instead of moving on and progressing, have decided to stay where they are and bunker down because of a recession mindset. This recession mindset did not give an upward funnel for the younger leaders to move forward because of the many experienced leaders that are staying put because of the recession mindset. Because younger leaders do not see a career path, they are moving to different companies. The pressure of younger workers to pay off school loans is causing them to prioritize any job over what they are passionate about. And because people are living longer and healthier, they want to stay longer and work. It is hard for someone who is a real leader to retire at 65 when they are passionate about leadership – they will work longer. A leader wants to lead, what are they going to do transitioning to retirement. Real driven leaders are not going to sit at home and retire. (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Barry further articulated how a budget freeze took his dream away.

I was asked what it makes me feel like when we have to do a budget freeze, or we have to say everyone stop spending? I told them that it makes me feel like everything I was dreaming was put on hold. It takes the dream away. I think organizations have to rethink how they do budgeting moving forward. We need more funding of dream projects even if the economy turns down. I want to know my budget and be told to spend it, I don't want to be told, here is what we hope you have in the budget and then never knowing. It is how you communicate the budget. If I know what I have, I can dream with what I have. How people communicate budgets can influence how people dream about leadership. (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Lorenzo compared the Great Recession of 2008 to the Great Depression and the lingering effect it had on the Builder Generation. According to Lorenzo,

I think the Great Recession of 2008, in a little bit smaller way, had the same effect on what would be the Builder generation – what is true of the Builder generation, is they don't want to get rid of anything, they may not want to recycle or get rid of things because you just never know when you might need that, so, what came out of the Great Depression is that we had better be prepared for that again. People started hanging on to everything because in the back of their mind, that would have come in handy when the Depression hit. So, this generation developed retirement plans and investments to be their 'safety net.' And a lot of these babies took it in the shorts in 2008. What I believe happened is people said my security is no longer in my savings, it is in my work or they at least diversified into safer investments. They are willing to live with lower returns as long as they can work and still put money in and get matching contributions. So, I think the Great Recession of 2008 has made people say, I can't trust retirement, so I better trust my job. So, as this has an impact on younger workers, I think what is going to have to happen is companies are going to need to give older employees something that gives them a comfort in their retirement so they take it or do something to incentivize younger workers to hang in there. And I am not sure what that is. I think really what companies ought to do is that if they continue to invest and develop young talent but give them no opportunity then I think younger workers are going to say these development programs are useless and don't work because you don't get anything from it. These development programs must lead to opportunities or more and more people are going to say, I am just not going to do it because it gives you nothing. This could create people having an

interest in programs that are not in their own company, because if you go through company version of the MBA versus the ‘Harvard’ version of the MBA, which one is more marketable. This idea that just because I went to training and maybe even got a certification doesn’t mean a promotion or more opportunities, is an old idea. People have to see a return on their time and on the company’s money for them personally.

Leadership development programs will get knocked back a little if nothing tangible happens for people, we have to be more critical of these programs. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

## **Themes**

The following labels or codes were used to categorize the interview data: individual contributor mindset (ICM), people leader mindset (PLM), individual contributor success factors (ICSF), people leader success factors (PLSF), working for an individual contributor (WIC), impact of individual contributor leadership of people (ICLP), leadership transition challenges (LTC), leadership transition success factors (LTSF), leadership transition failure (LTF), leadership development failure (LDF), leadership development success (LDS), individual contributor (IC), transitioning to people leader (TPL), unprepared leaders (UPL), factors that could help with preparation for new role (PNR), leadership transition and recessions (LTR), and long-term impact of cycle (unprepared leaders; LTIM). Table 8 shows the frequency of each code related to each interview question and the major theme emerging from the study.

Table 8. Codes and Themes

*Codes and Themes*

Primary Interview Question	Codes – Frequency	Themes
Q1: How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	ICM – High PLM – High ICSF – High PLSF – High	Lead, thinking “me” or “we”—you get what you decide
Q2: What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	ICM – High WIC – High ICLP – High	Lead, thinking “we” and accelerate team performance
Q3: Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	LTC – High LTSF – High LTF – High	Lack of candidate selection, preparedness, and mentoring
Q4: Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	LDS – Medium IC – High	Everyone is a leader-is a myth
Q5: What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?	TPL – High	10 Leadership Transition Traps
Q6: People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?	UPL – High PNR – High	The excuse of time (own your development)
Q7: Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	LTR – Medium LTIM – Medium	The future of Leadership Development Effectiveness is mixed

**Theme 1: Lead, thinking “me” or “we”—you get what you decide.** It is clear that the failure of leadership transitions from an individual contributor to a people leader is a shared experience with all interview participants. “The me oriented individual contributor is looking at how he or she can marshal his or her skills, how they can utilize their time, how they can take advantage of their talents an opportunity” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019). “A people leader will know that the success of the whole organization will help the success of his or her own team” (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019). From the interviews, the researcher proposes the following definitions of an individual contributor and a people leader.

- An individual contributor is task driven with single accountability for results who excels at driving a task to completion, but also may be blind to seeing and supporting the greater purpose of the whole enterprise.
- A people leader is driven by humility, relationships, and effective communication to uncover the talents of his or her team to drive results for the whole enterprise.

For an enterprise to be successful, effective people leaders are needed. People leaders can see potential in others. “The people leader mindset is focused on how can I take advantage of the skills of my team, the time, the talent of my team, how can I maximize their efforts and coalesce the whole thing that in the end we achieve something significant” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019). They know how to help others find the extra gear in themselves to drive results. Individual contributors need to stay in individual contributor roles until specific training and self-reflection reveals they have the ability to become leaders of people. If the job at hand needs an individual contributor or task driven focus and the path to success will not be disruptive or damaging to the whole enterprise, then high-performing individual contributors should be rewarded for driving specific task related results. However, individual contributors should still be trained to work as a team when needed. Humility, vulnerability, self-directed relationship building, compelling communication, and enterprise thinking are key attributes of effective people leaders.

**Theme 2: Lead, thinking “we” and accelerate team performance.** To drive results for the enterprise through other people and teams, the leader with an individual contributor mindset will fail and can quickly frustrate others and lose the trust of his or her team. Participant Barry shared how an organization is saddled with unhealthy competition between departments and teams when each team leader operates with an individual contributor or “me” mindset. This

creates an environment where each department or team fights against each other for resources and attention. The leader then begins to ramrod his or her agenda. According to Barry, “People leaders with individual contributor mindsets create division in the broader context of the organization instead of unity” (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019).

An effective people leader will spend time with the team, focus on team building, be visible with the team, engage in team collaboration, and create unity. In contrast, a leader with an individual contributor mindset will be absent, not-visible, stop engaging, appear closed-off from others, and no longer provide help. Leading people with an individual contributor mindset will squelch creativity on a team. Teams will also experience high-turnover and burn-out. Over time, unhealthy competition will exist between departments and teams. People leaders should be cautioned that leading people is tough and that the pressure and expectations of leadership can become more and more intense pulling on a leader to retreat to an individual contributor mindset.

**Theme 3: Lack of candidate selection, preparedness, and mentoring.** When each participant was asked what is needed for the transition from an individual contributor to a people leader to be successful, the participants suggested that some form of testing or self-evaluation to first identify a person’s readiness or capability to move from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset was needed. In addition to a type of readiness evaluation, dedicating meaningful time to mentoring and coaching was needed. The participants also identified a lack of leaders understanding expectations. It was suggested training could focus more on how to draft clear expectations and track progress on meeting expectations.

Other factors that are needed for successful leadership transitions include moving away from the idea of development towards more of a radical role shift or transformation. As an example, Lorenzo expressed a need to better identify who might have the potential to lead others

by suggesting stretch assignments on volunteer teams as a good predictor of people leadership potential. “It is one thing to lead people who rely on you for a paycheck and it is another thing to lead volunteers” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019). Barry expressed that “we have to be careful not to throw people in the deep end of the pool if they can’t swim” (Participant Barry, June 3, 2019). Fernand shared how the profile or makeup of the team was a contributor to a leader’s early success or failure.

**Theme 4: Everyone is a leader-is a myth.** Each participant also expressed an opinion that the idea that everyone is a leader has led to failed transitions and the poor selection of candidates to attend leadership development training. According to the participants, not everyone is a leader—and that is okay. Pinning the failure of leadership transitions solely on failed leadership development programs may be painting with a broad brush. According to Lorenzo, “there may be a failure in actually identifying if this person is able to move from an individual contributor to people leader. So, no amount of leadership development will work” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019). Many of the participants described the importance of relationships when transitioning from an individual contributor to a people leader. “If you go to the performance step and forget the people step, you can fail” (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019). Jerry also expressed “helping people look at things from a relationship perspective not just a tactical or numbers perspective” (Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Fernand said it this way, “Without relationship you can’t be a leader” (Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019). Lorenzo shared an opinion that females may be more ready for leadership transitions because females may be more team oriented.

Males usually are more goal-oriented while women are usually more team-oriented.

There is a switch in men where they might say, 'I will run through that wall.' A female might think, 'well what would happen if we all ran through the wall together.'

(Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

The participants share that one way to think about not everyone being a leader is to focus leadership development programs more on developing highly professional individual contributors. According to Jerry,

I can see more people being satisfied with what they are doing because they are individual contributors. I think people are sometimes forced to be something they are not or in roles they are not comfortable with or good at. And so why not stay somewhere where your individual contribution makes sense to you and is very gratifying to you.

(Participant Jerry, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

In Lorenzo's experience, "we live in an era where, because of economic pressure, everyone wants to have a personal side hustle" (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019). Lorenzo further shared that from his experience, even if you are an individual contributor, "if you really want to do something big and significant, you are going to have people and teams."

**Theme 5: 10 leadership transition traps.** The participants identified 10 common traps, from personal experience, that prevent people from moving from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset.

1. The trap of personal ego and pride
2. The trap of devaluing people
3. The trap of not continuing to learn

4. The trap of overlooking great potential talent
5. The trap of doing it all yourself
6. The trap of little preparation
7. The trap of ignoring the warning signs of behaviors
8. The trap of peer group promotion
9. The trap of past success as an indicator of future success
10. The trap of the absence of vulnerability.

Barry said, “Leaders need to recognize that it is more fun when the team wins than when one individual wins” (Participant Barry, personal communication, June 3, 2019). From Jerry’s experience,

A common trap is thinking what made you successful to get to this new role is not what will make you successful in the new role. But also realizing that there may be things that make you successful that you need to keep doing. It is almost like doing a leadership transition stop, start and continue.

Jerry goes on to say that the secret to his leadership transition to an effective people leader is vulnerability. Fernand shared how the lack of real preparation is a trap.

**Theme 6: The excuse of time (own your development).** Exploring the lived experience of the participants when they were unprepared for a new role was an important aspect of the interviews as 75% of newly promoted leaders report being unprepared for new assignments (Keller & Meany, 2017). One aspect of being unprepared is the lack of time commitment to help others become successful. Fernand mentioned that preparation is a balancing act between technical acumen and leadership acumen. Fernand also describes how a lack of time and being too busy is a real barrier to the people side of leadership.

You may not know how to coach your employee on inclusiveness, but you better know how to take the next order. We are too busy to spend the right amount of time with people to help them prepare for new assignments or roles. Being too busy is a real issue.

(Participant Fernand, personal communication, June 6, 2019)

Jerry mentioned that he would have been better prepared if someone would have guided him.

Erin shared how in teaching, she was assigned a seasoned and experienced teacher for her entire first year. In Andrea's experience, "if you say you are too busy, you sound more important"

(Participant Andrea, personal communication, June 6, 2019).

From Andrea's experience, people should not wait to be trained or developed by their organizations. Andrea has found that there is a plethora of free and credible leadership material readily available. According to Andrea, "personal ownership of leadership development is what is failing" (Participant Andrea, personal communication, June 6, 2019).

### **Theme 7: The future of leadership development program effectiveness is mixed.**

Training more and more people on leadership with no tangible benefit to the participant (a raise, stretch assignment, promotion or new opportunity) may be compounding the problem.

This idea that just because I went to training and maybe even got a certification doesn't mean a promotion or more opportunities, is an old idea. People have to see a return on their time and on the company's money for them personally. Leadership development programs will get knocked back a little if nothing tangible happens for people, we have to be more critical of these programs. (Participant Lorenzo, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

The excuse of being too busy to effectively mentor and coach emerging leaders will catch up to organizations. As younger workers will be required to lead people earlier in their career

than previous generations, the need for real effective mentoring and effective and timely coaching is a critical gap in today's leadership transitions. Organizations should be exploring new leadership development practices.

Table 9 shows the relationship of the themes to the research questions.

Table 9. Relationship of Themes to Research Questions

*Relationship of Themes to Research Questions*

Research Questions	Themes Matrix		
RQ1. What is the impact to organizational effectiveness and performance when an individual in a people leadership role performs as an individual contributor?	10 Common Traps	Loss of Trust	Lack of time to coach and mentor leaders during transitions
RQ2. What are the critical success factors of individuals transitioning from individual contributor to people leader?	Humility and Readiness	Gain trust through relationship building first	Find a trusted mentor
RQ3. What are common failures for individual contributors transitioning to become a people leader?	10 Common Traps	Creating Division	Losing sight of the Enterprise vision
RQ4. What are the characteristics of a successful individual contributor? What are the characteristics of a successful people leader?	Working definition of individual contributor and people leader	Task driven or Team drive and Enterprise driven	Knowing the difference between the two

**Summary of the findings.** It is clear that the failure of leadership transitions from an individual contributor to a people leader is a shared experience with all interview participants. An individual contributor is task driven with single accountability for results who excels at driving a task to completion, but also may be blind to seeing and supporting the greater purpose of the whole enterprise. A people leader is driven by humility, relationships, and effective communication to uncover the talents of his or her team to drive results for the whole enterprise.

For an enterprise to be successful, effective people leaders are needed. People leaders can see potential in others. Effective people leaders know how to orchestrate the right conversations with others to bring out the talent they possess. Individual contributors need to stay in individual contributor roles until specific training and self-reflection reveals they have the ability to become leaders of people. If the job at hand needs an individual contributor or task driven focus, and the path to success will not disrupt others or damage the whole enterprise, then high-performing individual contributors should be rewarded for driving specific task related results. However, individual contributors should still be trained to work as a team when needed. Humility, vulnerability, self-directed relationship building, compelling communication, and enterprise thinking are key attributes of effective people leaders. It is a myth to think everyone is a leader.

To drive results for the enterprise through other people and teams, the leader who maintains an individual contributor mindset will fail quickly frustrating others and losing the trust of his or her team. An effective people leader will spend time with the team, focus on team building, be visible with the team, engage in team collaboration, and create unity. In contrast, a leader with an individual contributor mindset will be absent, not-visible, stop engaging, appear closed-off from others, and no longer provide help. Leading people with an individual contributor mindset will squelch creativity on a team. Teams will also experience high-turnover and burn-out. Over time, unhealthy competition will exist between departments and teams. People leaders should be cautioned that leading people is tough and that the pressure and expectations of leadership can become more and more intense pulling on a leader to retreat to an individual contributor mindset.

Training more and more people on leadership with no tangible benefit to the participant (e.g., a raise, stretch assignment, promotion or new opportunity) may be compounding the problem. The excuse of being too busy to effectively mentor and coach emerging leaders will catch up to organizations. As younger workers will be required to lead people earlier in their career than previous generations, the need for real effective mentoring and effective and timely coaching is a critical gap in today's leadership transitions. Organizations should be exploring new leadership development practices.

**Applications to professional practice.** Today's emerging leaders struggle to make an impact when transitioning to new roles. Emerging leaders are required to move faster, communicate more, assimilate to new technology with precision, and progress in their careers sooner than the generation before them (Ehrlich, 2017). As such, the importance of this study to the field of leadership and more specifically the field of career progressions could be significant to better understand the growing failure of leadership transitions. One way to better understand the growing failure of leadership transitions is to research the impact of emerging leaders who make the shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leadership mindset. There is a gap in the study of leadership transitions as it relates to an individual contributor mindset versus a people leadership mindset. Manderscheid and Freeman (2012) found that despite the glaring importance of leadership transitions, the research to correctly facilitate leadership transitions is lacking. According to Spears (2018), "leadership transitions are a high-stakes game" (p. 344).

This paper has highlighted several learnings to apply to professional practice that could increase the likelihood of leadership transition success. Increasing the success of leadership transitions can improve team trust and reduce the cycle time to achieve results. The general problem that was addressed is the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with

promotions and career progressions which result in lower employee engagement and lower team performance.

The immediate pressure facing leadership development programs, the need to produce more effective global leaders, and the lack of effective coaching has placed the future of leadership in jeopardy. An alarming 2,500 human resource professionals indicated that developing and identifying future talent is the number one skill needed in the next 36 months (Ray, 2018). The findings are relevant to improve business practices specific to successful leadership transitions. Two tools are recommended from this study to apply to professional practice to increase the success rate of leadership transitions. The first tool is a leadership transition readiness self-assessment. This tool can help leaders thoughtfully understand their own readiness for the new assignment or role. The second tool is a Start, Stop, Change, and Transition questionnaire. This tool should be used plan for a successful transition.

**Recommendations for action.** Two tools are recommended for action to increase the success of leadership transitions. Table 10 reflects a leadership transition readiness assessment. This is a self-assessment designed to help a leader identify his or her readiness for the leadership transition and through a simple scoring process uncover the need to develop a more formal leadership transition plan, if needed. Table 11 is a tool to assist a leader make personal changes during the leadership transition to increase the likelihood of leadership transition success and team effectiveness.

Table 10. Leadership Transition Readiness Assessment

*Leadership Transition Readiness Assessment*

1.	A mentor or coach has been identified to assist me with the leadership transition.
2.	I have answered the Leadership Transition <i>Start, Stop, Change, and Transition</i> questions.
3.	I have developed actions to reflect my sincere desire to focus on relationship building first.
4.	I have reviewed the 10 common traps leading to leadership transition failure.
5.	I have a plan to not let a lack of time be my excuse for not building strong relationships with the team.
6.	I know how to lead with genuine humility (people see me as a humble leader).
7.	I prefer a role where I lead people over a role where I am an individual contributor.
8.	I understand the greater purpose of the Enterprise and how my team can contribute to the Enterprise success (my team and I may have to make sacrifices for the greater good of the Enterprise).
9.	I have a plan to be visible and engage with my team without micro managing, but empowering.
10.	I have identified someone to partner with me and hold me accountable to a successful leadership transition.

Score: (total possible is 30)

*Note.* A score below 25 indicates a need to spend more time reflecting on the new assignment and developing a formal transition plan. Rate each factor on a scale of 1 to 3 scale. (1 = inadequate, 2 = adequate, 3 = exceptional).

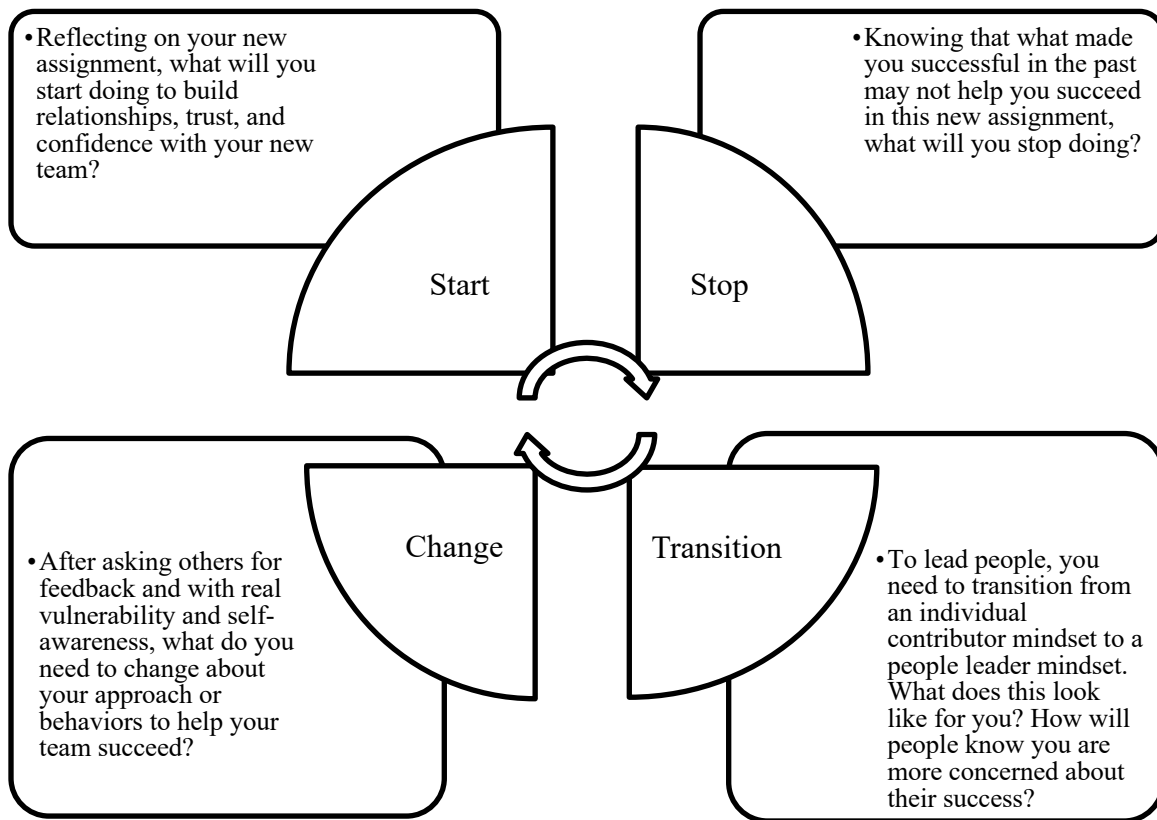


Figure 2. Leadership Transition Start, Stop, Change, and Transition.

Leadership development departments, talent acquisition professionals, recruiting firms, college graduates, human resource departments, and individuals seeking to find greater success when accepting new roles or assignments could be impacted by the results of this study and benefit from adopting the leadership readiness assessment tool and the start, stop, change, and transition tool to reduce the failure rate of leadership transitions. The results of this study could be disseminated to these departments, groups, or individuals through future articles regarding this research, from exposure to the research itself, and through a future publication of a leadership transition readiness book based on these findings by the researcher.

**Recommendations for further study.** In this paper, the researcher connected the dots between leadership transitions and the mindset of an individual contributor or a people leader as an important factor to determine success or failure. It is important for the reader to know that the

focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but to understand how the participants experience the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016). From the interviews, it was clear that all of the participants had a real-life experience with the phenomenon of leadership transitions from working for leaders or being a leader who struggled to shift their thinking from an individual contributor to a people leader. As this paper was developed, a handful of topics emerged that would benefit from future research, including the continuation of the concepts and tools developed here.

1. The connection between leadership transition success and person-job-fit surfaced during the interviews. This paper does not support the idea that leadership transition success can be achieved solely with the right mindset shift from an individual contributor to a people leader. Further study on additional factors, like person-job-fit, should be explored.
2. The research found that all of the participants were quick to share that not everyone can be a leader. The participants shared how programs to select leadership potential would be beneficial. Further study on identifying leadership potential should be explored.
3. This research only scratched the surface when it came to identify the need for specific training of high-performing individual contributors (for individual contributor roles). Further study on leadership development for high-performing individual contributors should be explored.
4. One participant shared an opinion that females may be better equipped to lead teams. Further study to explore the effectiveness of female team leaders over male team leaders should be explored.

5. Three concepts or tools emerged from this study for the application of professional practice: the 10 common traps of leadership transitions, a leadership transition readiness assessment, and a leadership transitions stop, start, change, and transition questionnaire. These concepts were put forward in this paper, but no research to determine the effectiveness of these tools or to pilot these tools with a control group was performed. Further study to determine the effectiveness of these tools should be explored.

## **Reflections**

A characteristic that distinguishes a qualitative study from a quantitative study is the researcher's influence on the study. In a qualitative study the participants drive the outcome as compared to a quantitative study that is guided mostly from the view of the researcher (Creswell, 2016). The researcher's views are less evident in quantitative research whereas in qualitative research, the researcher's remarks and biases are present (Creswell, 2016). In this study, the role of the researcher was explicit, and the researcher's comments were identified for the reader.

The researcher followed the data collection method and the interview protocol outlined in this paper. Common in qualitative phenomenological research is the researcher's potential knowledge of the participants. In this study the researcher and the participants had a general working relationship from previous personal or professional settings. The participants were selected for their specific leadership roles and experience. The researcher has a personal bias towards the subject of leadership transitions from personal experience working in Fortune 500 organizations for more than 20 years where the researcher has held key positions and been responsible for on-boarding new leaders. The researcher has experienced failed leadership transitions and successful leadership transitions. The researcher admits to having a bias towards

experience that supports the general problem of ineffective leadership development programs, a high-failure rate of leadership transitions, and a general environment where people feel unprepared for new assignments. The researcher has a genuine concern for developing a new generation of leaders. Because of the personal and or working relationship with the participants, the possible effect the researcher may have had on the participants could have created a very relaxed environment where the participants were very willing to share in-depth personal experiences. The researcher specifically avoided discussing this research or asking to interview participants that he had worked with in the past or with currently.

During the course of this study, the researcher's thinking began to evolve as a result of this study. The interview guidelines included an acknowledgment that neither the participant nor the researcher fully knew where the interview might lead (Rawat, 2016). The researcher found a greater passion from the participants for this topic than anticipated. Leadership transition challenges are real. The connection between leadership transition success and person-job-fit surfaced during the interviews. The research found that all of the participants were quick to share that not everyone can be a leader. This research only scratched the surface when it came to identify the need for specific training of high-performing individual contributors (for individual contributor roles). The idea that organizations may have forgotten to train highly-professional individual contributors on how to be productive individual contributors was the greatest change in the researcher's thinking. The three concepts or tools that emerged from this study for the application of professional practice was not expected (10 common traps to leadership transition success, Leadership Transition Readiness Assessment, and Leadership Transition Start, Stop, Change, and Transition Questionnaire). The researcher believes these tools could be greatly used to improve leadership transition success.

As stated in Section 1, after breaking down 1 Kings 3:1-15 (MSG), critical leadership concepts emerge:

1. The importance of listening to effectively lead people
2. The realization that leading people cannot be achieved on your own
3. Leadership begins with humility and a desire to lead
4. Leading people requires wisdom and maturity
5. Effective people leadership yields unexpected bonuses for the leader

These biblical concepts surfaced during the study in various ways. Either through the literature review or the interviews, the concepts of how to better lead others through listening, expanding your circle of support, or having a desire to lead others supported the passage found in 1 Kings.

**Summary and study conclusions.** There are five concepts or perceptions (the phenomenon) that provide the foundation for this research. Each concept supports the specific problem statement and research questions: failure of leadership development program effectiveness, a clog in career progression pipelines for younger workers primarily due to delayed retirements, the high failure rate of leadership transitions, the contribution to failed leadership transitions due to an inability to shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset, and the impact of economic cycles on leadership development.

The research suggests that even though leadership development in the United States is a \$24 billion industry (Ashkenas & Hausmann, 2016), it is an industry, according to Gallagher (2017), that has failed leaders, organizations, and many communities. The Global Leadership Forecast (2018) survey found that the top two concerns for executives is the development of leaders and the failure to attract and retain high-potential talent. It is becoming more apparent that leadership development programs may not be working. The impact of poor leadership

development is all the more evident in failed leadership transitions, career promotions, and career progressions. Despite the efforts of many leadership development programs, more than 80 percent of new leaders transitioning into the first role as a leader fail to make a successful transition (Korn Ferry Leadership Principles, 2018).

Today's workplace is changing at a greater pace than in previous times due to the delayed retirement of Baby Boomers, the small number of Generation X workers, and the numerous Millennials and post-Millennial's required to lead others at an earlier time in their career than previous generations. According to Fry (2018), in 2016 Millennials became the largest generation in the workforce. Today's emerging leaders are struggling to make an impact when transitioning to new roles. Emerging leaders are required to move faster, communicate more, assimilate to new technology with precision, and progress in their careers sooner than the generation before them (Ehrlich, 2017). As such, the importance of this study to the field of leadership and more specifically the field of career progressions could be significant to better understand the growing failure of leadership transitions. One way to better understand the growing failure of leadership transitions is to research the impact of emerging leaders who make the shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leadership mindset. There is a gap in the study of leadership transitions as it relates to an individual contributor mindset versus a people leadership mindset. Manderscheid and Freeman (2012) found that despite the glaring importance of leadership transitions, the research to correctly facilitate leadership transitions is lacking.

This phenomenon was explored through in-depth interviews with for-profit and nonprofit leaders located in Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia. This area of the United States has been greatly impacted by The Great Recession of 2008. Dalton, Georgia, in Northwest

Georgia, had an average unemployment rate of 4.5% in 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). In 2009, the average unemployment rate reached 12.8%. In 2017, the unemployment rate in Dalton, Georgia improved to 5.7%. Chattanooga, Tennessee, in Southeast Tennessee, had an average unemployment rate of 4.1% in 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). In 2009, the average unemployment rate reached 9.5%. In 2017, the unemployment rate in Chattanooga, Tennessee improved to 3.9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 16, 2018). These two areas have experienced significant hardship and have emerged from The Great Recession. The ability to have successful leadership transitions, career progressions, and career promotions in these areas is pivotal to the future economic development of the region as many Baby Boomers can now afford to retire as the economy in these areas has improved making way for a new generation of leaders.

Many organizations are experiencing a gap in leadership pipelines due to the lingering effects of The Great Recession where older workers stayed in the workplace longer than in previous time periods. As these workers stayed in jobs longer than in other time periods, the promise of promotions and career progressions may have been lost on a large population of workers. This phenomenon, coupled with low budgets for leadership development programs, has created a scenario today where emerging leaders are less prepared to lead. This study addresses three gaps in business practice today. The first gap relates to the research that leadership development programs are not working. The second gap is research related to the failure of leadership transitions. At the core of this study is the third gap between leadership transitions and the lack of a successful shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leadership mindset.

The first gap relates to the research that leadership development programs are not working. Leaders continue to report that they are unprepared for new roles (Keller & Meany, 2017). This study reviewed the current literature associated with failed leadership development programs and the impact on organizations and people. The study also contrasted the impact of recessionary time periods and non-recessionary time periods on leadership development programs. This study attempted to understand this gap in more detail through an extensive literature review.

The second gap is research related to the failure of leadership transitions. This is believed to be one of the unintended consequences of failed leadership development programs. With a failure rate of 40% or higher, leadership transition is an important gap to address (McKeown, 2015). The literature review explored in detail the research around leadership transition failure for newly hired or promoted leaders. This study attempted to fill this gap by uncovering specific reasons for leadership transition failure through in-depth interviews and conversations with individuals regarding their real-world experience of this gap.

At the core of this study was the third gap between leadership transitions due to a lack of a successful shift from an individual contributor mindset to a people leadership mindset. It was proposed in this study that a mindset shift was a key factor in successful leadership transitions. It was believed that this shift was harder to make than organizations anticipated, and as such, more research and discussion is required to better understand the behaviors of a successful people leader.

To close the gaps and recommend application for professional practice, a phenomenological qualitative study was conducted. A qualitative phenomenological approach is appropriate to the problem being studied and the purpose of the study. This approach and

methodology were used to understand the experiences of the participants as they provided detailed information concerning the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with promotions and career progressions which resulted in lower employee engagement and lower team performance. The participants specifically described their experience with understanding the failure of emerging leaders to shift their thinking and behaviors from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset.

It is clear that the failure of leadership transitions from an individual contributor to a people leader is a shared experience with all interview participants. From the interviews, the researcher proposes the following definitions of an individual contributor and a people leader.

- An individual contributor is task driven with single accountability for results who excels at driving a task to completion, but also may be blind to seeing and supporting the greater purpose of the whole enterprise.
- A people leader is driven by humility, relationships, and effective communication to uncover the talents of his or her team to drive results for the whole enterprise.

For an enterprise to be successful, effective people leaders are needed. People leaders can see potential in others. Effective people leaders know how to orchestrate the right conversations with others to bring out the talent they possess. Individual contributors need to stay in individual contributor roles until specific training and self-reflection reveals they have the ability to become leaders of people. If the job at hand needs an individual contributor or task driven focus, and the path to success will not disrupt others or damage the whole enterprise, then high-performing individual contributors should be rewarded for driving specific task related results. However, individual contributors should still be trained to work as a team when needed. Humility,

vulnerability, self-directed relationship building, compelling communication, and enterprise thinking are key attributes of effective people leaders. It is a myth to think everyone is a leader.

To drive results for the enterprise through other people and teams, the leader who maintains an individual contributor mindset will fail and can quickly frustrate others and lose the trust of his or her team. An effective people leader will spend time with the team, focus on team-building, be visible with the team, engage in team collaboration, and create unity. In contrast, a leader with an individual contributor mindset will be absent, not-visible, stop engaging, appear closed-off from others, and no longer provide help. Leading people with an individual contributor mindset will squelch creativity on a team. Teams will also experience high-turnover and burn-out. Over time, unhealthy competition will exist between departments and teams. People leaders should be cautioned that leading people is tough and that the pressure and expectations of leadership can become more and more intense pulling on a leader to retreat to an individual contributor mindset.

Training more and more people on leadership with no tangible benefit to the participant (e.g., a raise, stretch assignment, promotion or new opportunity) may be compounding the problem. The excuse of being too busy to effectively mentor and coach emerging leaders may catch up to organizations. As younger workers may require to lead people earlier in their career than previous generations, the need for real effective mentoring and effective and timely coaching is a critical gap in today's leadership transitions. Organizations should be exploring new leadership development practices.

The immediate pressure facing leadership development programs, the need to produce more effective global leaders, and the lack of effective coaching has placed the future of leadership in jeopardy. An alarming 2,500 human resource professionals indicated that

developing and identifying future talent is the number one skill needed in the next thirty-six months (Ray, 2018). The findings are relevant to improve business practices specific to successful leadership transitions. Two tools are recommended from this study to apply to professional practice to increase the success rate of leadership transitions. The first tool is a Leadership Transition Readiness Self-assessment. This tool can help leaders thoughtfully understand their own readiness for the new assignment or role. The second tool is a Start, Stop, Change, and Transition questionnaire. This tool should be used plan for a successful transition.

In this paper, the researcher connected the dots between leadership transitions and the mindset of an individual contributor or a people leader as an important factor to determine success or failure. It is important for the reader to know that the focus of a phenomenological interview is not to understand the environment, but to understand how the participants experience the environment or phenomenon (Rawat, 2016). From the interviews, it was clear that all of the participants had a real-life experience with the phenomenon of leadership transitions from working for leaders or being a leader who struggled to shift their thinking from an individual contributor to a people leader. This research is suggesting that organizations adopt two tools to improve leadership transition effectiveness, a Leadership Transition Readiness Assessment and a Start, Stop, Change, and Transition questionnaire.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

CONFIDENTIAL

### LEADERSHIP TRANSITION *INTERVIEW GUIDE*

Introduction to study: Despite the efforts of many leadership development programs, more than 80% of new leaders transitioning into the first role as a leader fail to make a successful transition (Korn Ferry Leadership Principles, 2018). According to Custovic and Insaurrealde (2016), many leaders are not prepared for career progressions or leadership transitions because they may have been successful as individual contributors but struggle in roles where they are required to lead others. The general problem to be addressed is the high failure rate of leadership transitions associated with promotions and career progressions which result in lower employee engagement and lower team performance. Keller and Meany (2017) found that 75% of newly promoted leaders report being unprepared for the new assignment. McKeown (2015) found that the failure rate of newly promoted or hired leaders is 40%. The specific problem to be addressed is that a leader's failure to shift his or her thinking and behaviors from an individual contributor mindset to a people leader mindset could be a contributor to the high rate of leadership failure in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations in Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia, two regions that have emerged from The Great Recession of 2008. According to Adams (March 2017), since the recession, many boards have focused less on executive transitions and leadership development. Tiffan (2009) found that individual contributors achieve success through a mindset that thrives on individual drive and effort. Dawson (2016) found a people leader is recognized for his or her ability to create an atmosphere that motivates team members to succeed.

Your participation in this research is deeply appreciated. Your information and identify will remain confidential.

Time of interview:	
Date:	
Place:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee:	
Position of interviewee:	

## QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?
  - a. What are key characteristics that make a successful individual contributor?
  - b. What are key characteristics that make a successful people leader?
2. What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?
  - a. How did this impact you, the team, and the goals?
3. Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?
  - a. In your experience, what is needed for this transition to be successful?
  - b. In your experience, do you see more failed leadership transitions or successful leadership transitions? Why?
4. Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?
  - a. Why is the failure rate of leadership development programs high?
  - b. Is there too much focus on developing people leaders when the future could be more about high performing individual contributors as a result of the Gig Economy (Uber, etc.)?
    - i. The Gig Economy is characterized by contract work and short-term assignments.

5. What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?
  - a. What has been your experience with these traps? Was it a major setback or bump in the road? Why?
6. People feel unprepared for new roles.
  - a. When have you been unprepared for a new role?
  - b. What was the impact to you personally?
  - c. What could have helped you be more prepared?
7. Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still not be fully known.
  - a. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?
  - b. Have we seen a paradigm shift since The Great Recession of 2008 on how people approach careers, finances, promotional opportunities, and personal career risk-taking? Why?
8. Currently, the U.S. is near full employment. Research suggests many people may still be underemployed for the skills they have and that leaders are hard to find. Developing the next generation of leaders is a number one priority.
  - a. With this as a backdrop, what is your reaction to this potential “perfect storm” scenario?
  - b. What could be a long-term impact that is not being anticipated?

## Appendix B: IRB Approval

IRB Exemption 3744.04.09.19

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## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 9, 2019

Michael Lance Starks

IRB Exemption 3744.040919: Leadership Transitions: A Study of the Failure Rate of Career Progression Due to Individual Contributor Versus People Leadership Mindsets in Post-Recessionary Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia

Dear Michael Lance Starks,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

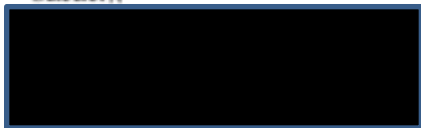
(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,



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## Appendix C: Participant Evaluation Rubric

## Evaluation Rubric “Barry”

Primary Interview Question Participant Alias: Barry	Codes	Quality of Response to Study			
		Low (-1)	Med (+1)	High (+3)	Score
How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	ICM PLM ICSF PLSF	Concept was not familiar	Able to describe concept	Response shows an in-depth knowledge of the two mindsets	3
What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	ICM WIC ICLP	No experience	Provided some examples	Response clearly reflects a lived experience	3
Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	LTC LTSF LTF	Limited understanding of leadership transitions	Understands the concept of leadership transitions	Response reflects an in-depth understanding of leadership transitions challenges	3
Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	LDS IC	Little to no participation in leadership development programs	Some experience with leadership development	Has participated in developing leadership development programs	3
What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?	TPL	No experience	Can describe some traps	Articulates well an understanding of traps	3
People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?	UPL PNR	Did not reflect being unprepared for a role	Has examples of being unprepared	A robust understanding and experience with the impact of being unprepared	3
Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	LTR LTIM	Does not reflect a correlation between economic cycles and leadership transitions	Can articulate a correlation	Has specific examples of economic cycles and leadership	3
Overall Score					21

### Evaluation Rubric “Lorenzo”

Primary Interview Question Participant Alias: Lorenzo	Codes	Quality of Response to Study			
		Low (-1)	Med (+1)	High (+3)	Score
How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	ICM PLM ICSF PLSF	Concept was not familiar	Able to describe concept	Response shows an in-depth knowledge of the two mindsets	3
What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	ICM WIC ICLP	No experience	Provided some examples	Response clearly reflects a lived experience	3
Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	LTC LTSF LTF	Limited understanding of leadership transitions	Understands the concept of leadership transitions	Response reflects an in-depth understanding of leadership transitions challenges	3
Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	LDS IC	Little to no participation in leadership development programs	Some experience with leadership development	Has participated in developing leadership development programs	3
What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?	TPL	No experience	Can describe some traps	Articulates well an understanding of traps	3
People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?	UPL PNR	Did not reflect being unprepared for a role	Has examples of being unprepared	A robust understanding and experience with the impact of being unprepared	3
Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	LTR LTIM	Does not reflect a correlation between economic cycles and leadership transitions	Can articulate a correlation	Has specific examples of economic cycles and leadership	3
Overall Score					21

### Evaluation Rubric “Fernand”

Primary Interview Question Participant Alias: Fernand	Codes	Quality of Response to Study			
		Low (-1)	Med (+1)	High (+3)	Score
How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	ICM PLM ICSF PLSF	Concept was not familiar	Able to describe concept	Response shows an in-depth knowledge of the two mindsets	3
What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	ICM WIC ICLP	No experience	Provided some examples	Response clearly reflects a lived experience	3
Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	LTC LTSF LTF	Limited understanding of leadership transitions	Understands the concept of leadership transitions	Response reflects an in-depth understanding of leadership transitions challenges	1
Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	LDS IC	Little to no participation in leadership development programs	Some experience with leadership development	Has participated in developing leadership development programs	3
What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?	TPL	No experience	Can describe some traps	Articulates well an understanding of traps	3
People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?	UPL PNR	Did not reflect being unprepared for a role	Has examples of being unprepared	A robust understanding and experience with the impact of being unprepared	1
Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	LTR LTIM	Does not reflect a correlation between economic cycles and leadership transitions	Can articulate a correlation	Has specific examples of economic cycles and leadership	1
Overall Score					16

### Evaluation Rubric “Erin”

Primary Interview Question Participant Alias: Erin	Codes	Quality of Response to Study			
		Low (-1)	Med (+1)	High (+3)	Score
How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	ICM PLM ICSF PLSF	Concept was not familiar	Able to describe concept	Response shows an in-depth knowledge of the two mindsets	3
What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	ICM WIC ICLP	No experience	Provided some examples	Response clearly reflects a lived experience	3
Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	LTC LTSF LTF	Limited understanding of leadership transitions	Understands the concept of leadership transitions	Response reflects an in-depth understanding of leadership transitions challenges	3
Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	LDS IC	Little to no participation in leadership development programs	Some experience with leadership development	Has participated in developing leadership development programs	3
What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?	TPL	No experience	Can describe some traps	Articulates well an understanding of traps	1
People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?	UPL PNR	Did not reflect being unprepared for a role	Has examples of being unprepared	A robust understanding and experience with the impact of being unprepared	3
Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	LTR LTIM	Does not reflect a correlation between economic cycles and leadership transitions	Can articulate a correlation	Has specific examples of economic cycles and leadership	1
Overall Score					18

### Evaluation Rubric “Andrea”

Primary Interview Question Participant Alias: Andrea	Codes	Quality of Response to Study			
		Low (-1)	Med (+1)	High (+3)	Score
How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	ICM PLM ICSF PLSF	Concept was not familiar	Able to describe concept	Response shows an in-depth knowledge of the two mindsets	3
What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	ICM WIC ICLP	No experience	Provided some examples	Response clearly reflects a lived experience	3
Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	LTC LTSF LTF	Limited understanding of leadership transitions	Understands the concept of leadership transitions	Response reflects an in-depth understanding of leadership transitions challenges	3
Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	LDS IC	Little to no participation in leadership development programs	Some experience with leadership development	Has participated in developing leadership development programs	3
What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?	TPL	No experience	Can describe some traps	Articulates well an understanding of traps	3
People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?	UPL PNR	Did not reflect being unprepared for a role	Has examples of being unprepared	A robust understanding and experience with the impact of being unprepared	3
Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	LTR LTIM	Does not reflect a correlation between economic cycles and leadership transitions	Can articulate a correlation	Has specific examples of economic cycles and leadership	1
Overall Score					19

### Evaluation Rubric “Jerry”

Primary Interview Question Participant Alias: Jerry	Codes	Quality of Response to Study			
		Low (-1)	Med (+1)	High (+3)	Score
How would you describe an individual contributor mindset and a people leadership mindset?	ICM PLM ICSF PLSF	Concept was not familiar	Able to describe concept	Response shows an in-depth knowledge of the two mindsets	3
What is your experience working for someone in a people leadership role that had an individual contributor mindset?	ICM WIC ICLP	No experience	Provided some examples	Response clearly reflects a lived experience	3
Typically, successful individual contributors are candidates to be promoted to people leadership roles, when this happens, why is the leadership transition difficult?	LTC LTSF LTF	Limited understanding of leadership transitions	Understands the concept of leadership transitions	Response reflects an in-depth understanding of leadership transitions challenges	3
Current research shows leadership development programs failing at a high rate. What is your experience in participating or developing leadership programs? What have you found to be successful?	LDS IC	Little to no participation in leadership development programs	Some experience with leadership development	Has participated in developing leadership development programs	3
What are the common traps people face when transitioning from an individual contributor role to a people leader role?	TPL	No experience	Can describe some traps	Articulates well an understanding of traps	3
People feel unprepared for new roles. When have you been unprepared for a new role and what was the impact to you personally?	UPL PNR	Did not reflect being unprepared for a role	Has examples of being unprepared	A robust understanding and experience with the impact of being unprepared	3
Research shows that there is lower funding for leadership development programs during recessions. The Great Recession of 2008 had a tremendous impact that may still may not be fully known. What is your experience with the impact of recessionary periods on leadership development and lack of promotion opportunities?	LTR LTIM	Does not reflect a correlation between economic cycles and leadership transitions	Can articulate a correlation	Has specific examples of economic cycles and leadership	3
Overall Score					21