GOING VIRTUAL: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE FACED BY ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS WHEN EMPLOYEES TRANSITION TO VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

by

Mary S. Johnson

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Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Business Administration

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Liberty University, School of Business

May 2022
Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities across the world moved their operations online. While a great deal of focus was placed on the value of teaching and learning during a crisis period, very little attention was paid to the other side of higher education institutions—the business side. Suddenly these institutions and their operational staff were forced to discover new ways to perform tasks that had always been completed in person. The leaders of these organizations faced the added challenge of ensuring that their workforce remained engaged and motivated while working in the midst of stressful, even chaotic situations. This study found that these leaders played a key role in the success of their workers in facing the challenges of moving to virtual work environments during a crisis. Through supportive leadership, effective communication, and even changes to their leadership models, these organizations succeeded in weathering the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the while learning lessons that many plan to take forward into their new normal.

*Key words:* higher education, transformational leadership, situational leadership, crisis, change management
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Approvals

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Mary S. Johnson, Doctoral Candidate    Date

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Katherine Hyatt, DBA, Dissertation Chair    Date

_________________________________________   ___________________
Kendrick Brunson, DBA, Committee Member    Date

_________________________________________   ___________________
Edward M. Moore, PhD, Director of Doctoral Programs    Date
Dedication

Always, first and foremost, I thank God. I thank God that this is finished, and I thank God that it is a work of which I can be proud. Many years ago, in a dark place, I was reminded of Jeremiah 29:11—that there was a plan for me—little ole me, a speck. And today, I feel the confirmation of the word in Philippians 1:6 that says, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” There were many days when I didn’t know if I could reach this point, but through the many people in my life, God carried me through.

I would like to dedicate this study to my family, without whom I never would have made it this far, academically or personally. To my parents, Wilson and Susan Coley, who encouraged a young girl to follow her dreams and taught me from an early age the value of hard work. For my girls, I want you to know that I have done this work for you to show you that if you put your mind to it and dedicate yourself, you can achieve anything. Kendyl and Koley, none of this would matter if I couldn’t share it with you; you two are my greatest success. I am so thankful that, even as young as you are, you supported me through this and encouraged me in so many ways. Paul, you are my best friend, and there is no one else I would rather walk this journey with than you. You have held me when I cried and cheered me on when I didn’t think I could take another step or write another word. When I needed solid ground, you have been my rock. I thank God every day that He brought you to me. To my family, I promise, we can take a break now . . . for a little bit at least.
Acknowledgments

There have been so many people who have helped and supported me on this, my hero’s journey. From the moment I was called to this adventure, I have been blessed with a group of coworkers who have not only encouraged me, but also served as proofreaders and sources of inspiration. Most specifically, Dr. Kelley Brock-Simmons for her ideas and pleas for me to write a “nice little dissertation,” and Emily Zank for not only asking the questions that helped me to reach the necessary page counts when I didn’t think I could, but for so much more. I could write many pages and still not fully describe the support you have been.

At times, I felt that I couldn’t take another step further. It was during those times that my chair, Dr. Katherine Hyatt, encouraged me to keep my head up, keep working, and keep moving. Without her encouragement, I could not have “defeated my windmills,” as I told her once. It was true, I had built up the monsters of a literature review so big in my mind that I didn’t think I could overcome the challenge. But with her support, I succeeded. I am also eternally grateful for the guidance of Drs. Kenderick Brunson and Nicole Lowes. Entering into this process, I could not imagine my work being worthy of the distinction of a doctoral dissertation. It was through the guidance of my chair, committee, and administrators that this study was born.

Finally, I am so thankful to the institutions who let me into their confidence and allowed me to understand the difficulties they faced when the COVID-19 pandemic sent everyone home for the longest two weeks of our lives. It is my greatest hope that the lessons we learned from this will help us to be better leaders.
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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

In March 2020, the world was facing a challenge not seen in modern history (Michelli, 2021). While several viruses have been declared a pandemic, with far-reaching implications, SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, is the first in modernity to impact people in such a vast and enduring way (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Indeed, it has been framed as a health, financial, psychological, and educational crisis by many (LoGiudice et al., 2020; Spiteri, 2021; Wiebers & Feigin, 2020). Michelli (2021) explained, “Unlike prior crises such as the global financial market crash in 1980 or the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington DC, COVID-19’s effects were universal” (p. 8). Higher educational institutions were no different than businesses throughout the pandemic. Indeed, they faced a dual challenge of maintaining their educational activities while also managing the business side of operating an organization with employees spread out like never before. This study examined how a subset of those organizations faced the challenges, and the lessons that they learned.

Background of the Problem

With the COVID-19 pandemic impacting people across the globe, schools, businesses, and governments were forced to find new ways in which to operate (Michelli, 2021). On March 19, 2020, California became the first state to issue a stay-at-home order with many cities and states following suit and forcing residents to begin working and schooling from home (AJMC Staff, 2021). This change in working circumstances meant that the way that employees and their managers interacted had to change (Lagowska et al., 2020). Workers who were once able to speak with their supervisor face to face for guidance or support now found themselves at home and attempting to interact with that supervisor through videoconferencing software. Alternatively, organizational leaders were attempting to discover not only how to maintain
operations in an environment that was entirely foreign to them but also how to show strength and support for their workers. One area where this transition was magnified was in the rapid move online by colleges and universities. Leadership from these institutions faced moving both business and educational operations to an online format rapidly. An initial result was that many students attempted to sue, claiming reductions in quality and quantity of services (News Service of Florida, 2021; Stirgus, 2020). Through this research study, I sought to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by these leaders.

**Problem Statement**

The general problem to be addressed is the challenges faced by organizational leaders during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, often resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement. Bartsch et al. (2020) argued that in periods of crisis, employee performance is impacted by leader behavior. Lagowska et al. (2020) explained that leaders who seek to use traditional methods of oversight or management with employees during a rapid transition to remote environments will encounter difficulty in assessing and ensuring the engagement of those employees. Galanti et al. (2021) explained that, even in an ideal environment, remote work led to a decrease in employee engagement and productivity and that with the increased distractions found in a crisis environment, engagement and productivity were further reduced. The specific problem to be addressed is the potential challenges faced by organizational leaders within private higher educational institutions in the southeastern United States during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, possibly resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the challenges faced by organizational leaders of private higher educational institutions during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, often resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement. Further, this study explored the methods available to these leaders to increase engagement and productivity within these employee groups.

Research Questions

To address the specific problem, several research questions were developed. The purpose of these questions was to develop an understanding of the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about for leaders in higher educational institutions. Beyond the challenges faced by these leaders, it was important to gain insight into how employees were motivated to complete tasks and how that motivation may have been impacted by the changing events that the crisis induced. Further, as this study sought to evaluate the specific industry of private higher educational institutions, that industry should be evaluated to determine if it faced different challenges for its employees and leadership. To understand these aspects of the study, the following research questions were developed.

RQ1: What challenges do leaders in higher educational institutions face when moving to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?

RQ1a: What can leaders do to overcome these challenges?

RQ1b: In what ways can these leaders adapt to challenges to successfully transition?

RQ2: How does working in a virtual environment differ from a traditional brick-and-mortar institution?
RQ3: How does faculty and staff engagement impact the organizational performance of a higher educational institution after quickly transitioning to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?

**Nature of the Study**

There were four primary paradigms that could impact the researcher’s approach. These included positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and pragmatism. While both positivism and post-positivism are typically used for quantitative research studies, qualitative studies usually consist of either constructivism or pragmatism. It was vital for me to understand my paradigm because, as Merriam and Grenier (2019) explained, “your particular perspective will determine the specific research design that you employ for actually carrying out your study” (p. 5). By understanding my perspective, I was able to choose the best and most effective design for the research study.

**Discussion of Research Paradigms**

According to Mertens (2020), the positivist and post-positivist paradigms may sometimes be qualitative but are most often found in quantitative research. This is because both paradigms have a strong reliance on the use of a scientific approach to research, where specific steps are used to test cause-and-effect relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the greatest divide between the positivist view and the post-positivist view appears in the certainty of the cause-and-effect relationship. This division arises because, while positivists view cause-and-effect situations where the cause is directly associated with the effect, the post-positivist is more focused on the probability of an event occurring based on circumstances (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Additionally, positivism does not accept that researchers may interpret results or situations differently from one another, which means that because all parties involved see every
aspect of the experiment the same, the results will all be the same. Further, positivism does not account for bias on the part of the researcher in the testing process. Alternatively, post-positivism recognizes that the lens through which the researcher views the world generally, and the study specifically, can impact his or her interpretation of the results. Because of this possibility of bias on the part of the researcher, post-positivism looks to multiple studies in order to determine the probability of an outcome instead of trusting the results because of the expectation of supreme objectivity (Mertens, 2020). As this research study was qualitative in nature, having sought to understand the challenges faced by higher education institution leadership, there were paradigms more suited to answering the research questions presented.

Constructivism is typically a qualitative approach to research. As such, it was an option for this research study. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that constructivism evaluates a situation from a broad perspective in order to better understand the ways in which the subjects are creating meaning from the experience and situations in which they find themselves. This paradigm goes further into the idea of bias than that of the post-positivist. Indeed, the constructivist paradigm actually looks to the influence of the researcher on the creation of research and its results (Mertens, 2020). Where the positivist and post-positivist approaches seek to prove the results of scientific experimentation in the social situation, the constructivist paradigm pursues an understanding of the situation and the impact of those involved (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Because this paradigm considers the influence of the researcher in the creation of the research, it does not provide the best option for understanding the challenges faced by others as it focuses on the researcher specifically rather than the higher educational institution leadership.
The research paradigm chosen for this study was pragmatism. Pragmatism, as it exists today, is strongly influenced by John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James, who all looked to the impact of inquiry on the research topic (Dixon, 2019). Further, this approach focuses on the “practical implications” of research (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 28). As Kelly and Cordeiro (2020) explained, the pragmatic approach seeks to better understand problems in the context in which they are taking place rather than the more philosophical ideas of truth or reality. In essence, this form of research seeks to discover the solution to a problem and how to enact that solution rather than the cause of the problem. To achieve this goal, the researcher uses several different forms of data collection with the belief that the best tool is the one that solves the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, a researcher who is based in pragmatism will use many different methodologies as they do not see a single approach as being the only or best option, but rather that the best option is the one that addresses the problem presented.

Specifically, the problem presented in this research focused on the experiences of higher education institutional leaders and the employees that they oversee within a specific context; pragmatism was useful in examining the move to virtual work due to a crisis because it “places high regard on the reality of, and influence of, the inner world of human experience in action” (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 26). This paradigm aided me in better understanding the experiences of those involved and how those experiences influenced the problem studied.

**Discussion of Design**

This study, through its attempt to understand the challenges of leaders at higher education institutions to engage and manage employees transitioning to a virtual work environment, was considered to be social research. One of the defining characteristics of social research is the process taken by the researcher to gather and understand information about the behaviors of
people in specific situations. Social research will fall into one of three design groups (Ragin & Amoroso, 2019): fixed, flexible, and mixed methods. Fixed designs are typically made up of experimental designs, quasi-experiments, and non-experimental fixed design. In an experimental design, the researcher tests a theory based on a hypothesis; in quasi-experiments, the researcher uses the same approach, but the same factors, such as random assignment and controls, are not able to be used (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The final design type is the non-experimental design. This form of fixed design is typically used when the researcher is not the one manipulating the situation or environment but rather is looking for relationships between variables. Fixed designs rely on validity, reliability, and generalizability as means for fostering trust in the results of the testing. Creswell (2016) explained that these concepts are backed up by statistical data generated during the research, allowing others to replicate the testing and apply it to other groups. Because this study did not seek to test a hypothesis or manipulate the environment in which the participants were operating, the fixed design was not the optimal choice.

The mixed-methods design attempts to use both qualitative and quantitative data to address the research questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This design approach offers the benefits of compare results from both data collection processes, ensuring reliability, allowing the researcher to answer multiple research questions, and generating data that allow the researcher to create visuals to explain the data. Doyle et al. (2016) pointed out that the mixed methods approach should be used when neither fixed nor flexible designs would sufficiently answer the research questions. However, this approach is not without challenges. Because this is a newer strategy, there are fewer researchers who are familiar with the process, and collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data can be time-consuming (Robson & McCartan,
The time involved in a mixed-methods design made it less appealing for this research study because I sought to explore challenges related to workers who transitioned to a virtual work environment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, my desire to ensure the findings of this research study were relevant and timely drove the need for a research design that allowed a more responsive timeline than was available in a mixed-methods study. Finally, the mixed-methods design was a more complex design than was necessary to answer the research questions posed in this study.

Flexible design in social research focuses on subjects in their natural setting and believes that the researcher (and his/her biases) cannot be separated from the research, while using several tools for the gathering of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Typically, flexible designs will involve a case study, ethnography, grounded theory, or phenomenology (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Because of the more open nature and due to the researcher’s close relationship to the content, ensuring trust and reliability is important in flexible designs. Robson and McCartan explained that in flexible designs, the researcher attempts to show that the results of the study are credible, dependable, and can be confirmed.

This study was conducted with a flexible design using a qualitative method; specifically, a multiple case study design was used. With the selected research problem, I sought to understand the challenges faced by organizational leaders during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, often resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement.

A qualitative approach for such research was valuable to understand this problem for many reasons. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative design focuses on individuals involved in the concept to be researched within the natural environment of the
problem, allowing them to establish a context for the research and any suggested solutions. Further, Robson and McCartan (2016) suggested that pragmatism considers both the context of experiences and also focuses on the application of solutions to research. Pragmatism was strongly suited to discovering those issues faced by organizational leaders who quickly transitioned employees to a virtual environment. One of the common themes in the pragmatic approach to qualitative research is the importance of context and the environment where the research problem is to be evaluated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This emphasis on context made these methods valuable in discovering the challenges faced by organizational leaders who quickly transitioned their employees to a remote working environment.

**Discussion of Method**

As this research study was conducted using a flexible design, the primary methods I could have chosen included the case study or phenomenology. Holley and Harris (2019) justified the use of different methods as a means for addressing a broader range of research questions. I needed to take into account the many aspects of the study to choose the most appropriate method to address all aspects of the problem to ensure that the method supported the framework for the study (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

A case study, according to Yin (2018), is one of the most difficult approaches that a researcher can choose. This method allows the researcher to conduct a study, gathering a wealth of information on current issues while they are taking place (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Case studies allow researchers to gather information from “observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 96–97). Additionally, this type of method is considered to be bounded, meaning that it takes place within a specified set of circumstances, specific people, organization, or location.
A phenomenological approach seeks to understand the commonalities in a group of people who have had similar experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When using phenomenology, the researcher seeks to know what the group members have experienced and also how it was experienced. From this knowledge, it is then possible to, as Holley and Harris (2019) explained, “understand the essential lived experiences shared among a larger number of participants” (p. 105). A key concept that arises throughout the literature regarding phenomenological research is the ability of the researcher to determine the essence of the experience of the individuals as a whole regarding their shared circumstances (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holley & Harris, 2019). The phenomenological design is beneficial in many areas of research. Merriam and Grenier (2019) explained that this method is especially beneficial when the researcher seeks to better understand emotional topics like stress and loneliness.

There are individual aspects of this research study that could have made the phenomenological method beneficial. For example, understanding the needs of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic could have been studied using the phenomenological approach, as I was not only exploring an emotional topic but was also attempting to understand the experience of a group. However, when addressing the overall study and the research questions as presented, the phenomenological approach would have been more challenging. As an example, seeking to understand the challenges faced by leaders in higher education institutions was not in the scope of understanding the experience of that leader, but rather the specific issues they faced.

The case study approach allows the researcher to focus on a particular case (or cases) to gain a more holistic perspective on an issue and thus discover practical applications for the research (Yin, 2018). To understand the specific research problem of this study, I needed to evaluate group behaviors, processes, and institutional policies to understand better the issues
faced by organizational leaders who quickly moved employees into a virtual environment. Yin argued that these ideas are well addressed by using a case study method. Further, there are three conditions where the case study is considered most useful, to include (a) the type of research question asked, (b) whether or not the study requires that the researcher control behavioral events, and (c) if the research focuses on contemporary events. The primary research questions of this study sought to answer the question of "how" while other questions appeared to be of the "what" or "are" variety; they were formed from the perspective of understanding the extent of the situation. In this study, I did not wish to control behavioral events but rather to observe behavior within the context of a specific event (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, each of the three conditions presented by Yin (2018) indicates that this study was benefitted by using the multiple case study method.

**Discussion of Triangulation**

When conducting research with a flexible design, it is important to understand the difference in the importance of validity and how it differs from the same term in a fixed design. While validity in the fixed design will typically refer to the accuracy of data calculations and sample sizes, in a flexible design, it will mean that the results are accurate and trustworthy (Creswell, 2016). Though these may sound similar, they are quite different, especially in the methods used to ensure validity. One way to ensure validity in a qualitative study is the use of triangulation. According to Holley and Harris (2019), triangulation is the use of “multiple methods of data collection or sources of data to verify and deepen their understanding of what is occurring in the study” (p. 168). To further elaborate, this can involve multiple methods of data collection or data triangulation, the use of multiple observers, or observer triangulation, the use
of multiple methods, or methodological triangulation, or the use of multiple theories or theory triangulation (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Yin (2018) encouraged the use of data triangulation when using the case study method of research, noting that the use of multiple data sources often results in a higher quality study that shows a more in-depth understanding of the topic. In the case study approach, data triangulation will rely on the use of data sources that may include interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and documentation. This study focused on a multiple case study, which allowed me to use multiple sources of data but also allowed me to consider replication, strengthening the results of the research.

**Summary of the Nature of the Study**

This study used a qualitative, multiple case study methodology in a pragmatic approach, which allowed the researcher to understand the challenge faced by a specific group within an organization and address those challenges, providing options for improvement. This method was directed by the idea that a specific problem was to be addressed with real-world implications. According to Kelly and Cordeiro (2020), the pragmatic research approach aims to gain actionable knowledge through an understanding of specific events or behaviors. This was in line with the case study’s purpose of understanding a more extensive issue by investigating it through the bounded nature of the problem. Further, based on the conditions presented by Yin (2018), the research problem focused on a contemporary issue while asking the questions of how, why, and what, making it a good candidate for a multiple case study approach. In order to address concerns about validity, data triangulation was incorporated into the study, increasing the reliability and quality of the study.
Conceptual Framework

This research framework presented the many factors that were seen to influence private higher education institutions in the southeast United States and these institutions’ attempts to successfully navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the research study showed that these concepts are, indeed, highly interconnected. Further, this study indicated that each of the concepts are more closely reliant on one another than previously thought. An example is that job design was previously indicated to only impact employee commitment. However, the findings of this study indicate that while this is true, situational leadership theory also influences job design. In the field study, participants indicated that changes to job design needed to be made in response to workers’ ability to complete tasks and changes in required supervision.

Concepts

Organizational Performance Is Related to Employee Engagement. According to Vance (2006), engaged employees show greater commitment to their organization, which leads to a competitive advantage. Organizational leaders need to sustain and improve employee engagement to increase organizational performance; this need is addressed through this study’s research questions.

Employee Engagement Is Related to Employee Satisfaction and Needs. For employees to be fully engaged, they need to be satisfied with their job and work environment (Shantz et al., 2013). Because employee engagement is tied to employee satisfaction and productivity (Robbins & Coulter, 2018), it was important for me as the researcher to understand what factors led to such satisfaction and how that relates back to the employees’ engagement in their organization.
**Virtual Environments Impact Employee Engagement.** Panteli et al. (2019) explained that working in a virtual environment brings different challenges like (a) technology, (b) background distractions, and (c) changes in organizational culture to the way an organization can create engagement with employees. These are directly related to the ability of leaders of private higher educational institutions to engage employees to ensure that the organization maintains effectiveness.

**The Needs of Employees Are Impacted by Crisis Situations.** Lagowska et al. (2020) pointed out that in a crisis situation, the needs of employees shift because of the changes taking place, which may create uncertainty in the work environment. Because employees’ needs are different in a crisis situation, this had to be considered in the research.

**Theories**

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.** The COVID-19 pandemic has brought concepts such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs back to the forefront, primarily because the needs of workers have become more obvious with concepts such as safety, which may be considered a given to most, now becoming essential for employee effectiveness (Church & Ezama, 2020). It was important when considering the research problem to understand how employee needs may have changed so that leaders can more effectively encourage engagement.

**Situational Leadership Theory.** This theory of leadership was designed by Hersey and Blanchard in the 1960s and seeks to guide organizational leaders in their approach based on the present situation in which they are leading (Northouse, 2019). This theory indicates that, based on the needs of the organization in a particular setting, leaders will need to provide different levels of support or direction. As noted previously, crisis situations impact the needs of employees. Based on situational leadership theory, leaders may also need to adapt their level of
involvement and their approach to leadership in such instances. Lagowska et al. (2020) explained that, in times of crisis, people within an organization look to leadership for “guidance, comfort, hope, and accurate information” (p. 1). This new expectation from employees may require changes to the ways different leaders approach their position, which ties directly into the specific problem statement and how leaders can effectively oversee and engage employees.

**Transformational Leadership Theory.** Transformational leadership uses genuine relationships that leaders develop with their followers to create a transformation in both the workers and managers (Northouse, 2019). This may be especially beneficial during periods of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, as a key concept is the shared vision created by organizational leaders (Izzah et al., 2020). Because employees look to leaders to shape and understand the circumstances in determining the best way out of a crisis, the ability to provide such a vision would help organizations navigating uncertain situations (Lagowska et al., 2020). Further, research has shown that employees can be motivated by the relationships with organizational leaders, increasing productivity (Krajcsák, 2018). As a key factor of the specific problem statement was the diminished productivity of employees, the role of leadership in increasing employee motivation played a role in addressing this problem.

**Actors**

**Private Colleges and Universities in Southeastern United States.** These educational institutions are located within the southeastern United States that are either for-profit or non-profit and are accredited and licensed by an accrediting body but are not governed by the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). For the purpose of this study, non-profit institutions served as the focus of research. It is this type of institution that served as the basis for the specific problem.
Private College and University Leaders. Institutional leaders included those individuals who are responsible for direct-report employees and/or overall decision-making for the institution. This group included upper-level college leaders, including positions such as university vice presidents and provosts. Additionally, to gain a more granular perspective, department heads were also included in this group. Typical roles in these positions include director of financial aid, director of undergraduate admissions, or director of human resources. The specific problem statement sought to understand the challenges these individuals face when there is a need to quickly transition to a virtual environment during periods of crisis.

Staff. Although these employees do not teach in colleges and universities, they face unique difficulties when they have to quickly transition to a virtual environment during periods of crisis. These employees include those in financial aid, human resources, registrar, instructional technology, informational technology, and more. The need to keep these employees engaged is important to the institution’s ability to function effectively.

Constructs

Organizational Change. When organizational leaders must quickly transition to a virtual environment during periods of crisis, the idea of organizational change should be considered. Especially important in a crisis situation is the possibility of employee resistance to change. As Spector (2013) explained, employee reactions to change are related directly to the ways in which that leaders manage the change. This construct is one of the overarching themes for how organizational leaders manage the changes that take place during periods of crisis, which could influence how employees react to the changes that take place.

Leadership Style. As noted above, some leadership styles may be more effective at motivating and engaging employees in particular scenarios (Abdullahi et al., 2020). Considering
this, the leadership style of those involved should be considered in understanding the challenges faced by organizational leaders when they must quickly transition to a virtual environment during periods of crisis. This construct could play a role in how organizational leaders approach management during crisis periods.

**Organizational Culture.** Spicer (2020) pointed out that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational cultures have changed, affecting employee performance. This sort of change is important for organizational leaders to understand as they find themselves in crisis situations. While negative changes have been found, it is also possible to foster employees’ psychological safety through the changes taking place in the culture of organizations. As Kumar (2019) explained, certain aspects of organizational culture can enhance employee engagement, and a further understanding of this construct will be beneficial to organizational leaders who wish to maintain employee engagement.

**Job Design.** Because job design is considered one of the key factors in employee engagement (Vance, 2006), effective job design and an understanding of how job design changes when workers must quickly transition to a virtual environment during periods of crisis is important to understand. This may be seen as an independent variable, as it could influence employee engagement.

**Employee Commitment.** Krajcsák (2018) explained that there are five primary forms of employee commitment: (a) affective, (b) continuance, (c) normative, (d) professional, and (e) deliberate, with the type of commitment influencing an employee’s attachment to their organization. Further, employee commitment can impact the positive or negative behaviors of the employee, which will have an effect on organizational effectiveness.
**Employee Engagement.** Employee engagement may be influenced by employee commitment, job design, and other factors (Krajcsák, 2018; Kumar, 2019; Vance, 2006). This concept refers to the level of connection and satisfaction that an employee has with their job and results in increased productivity in organizations (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). Because employee engagement is influenced by factors that are shown to change when organizations must quickly transition to a virtual environment during periods of crisis, understanding how to maintain engagement is essential to organizational productivity (Lagowska et al., 2020; Panteli et al., 2019).

**Relationships Between Concepts, Theories, Actors, and Constructs**

Working from left to right in the framework diagram (see Figure 1), the relationships between each aspect of the framework can be explained. The first concept is that the needs of employees are impacted by crisis situations. Lagowska et al. (2020) explained that the changing environments in which employees work along with the increased uncertainty cause alterations to the basic needs of workers. This concept is directly related to the theory of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where employees must reevaluate their needs in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ryan et al. (2020) explained that the crisis created by COVID-19 has caused employees to revert back to a focus on safety needs related to job security and health, rather than their previous focus on higher levels of Maslow’s hierarchy such as self-actualization.

Vance (2006) pointed out that organizations experience significant advantages when employees are engaged in their work activities. Therefore, when employees are more focused on these basic needs, they are unable to engage fully in their work environments, especially when working from home (Galanti et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2020). Because of this inability to focus and engage, their performance diminishes and the quality of their work suffers, negatively
impacting the organization’s overall performance (Galanti et al., 2021; Vance, 2006). In addition to the basic needs of the employees being challenged, these workers who have been required to shift their work to a virtual environment online are also facing challenges with learning new technologies (i.e. hardware, software, etc.) along with attempting to merge this new work environment with their home life (Bartsch et al., 2020; Galanti et al., 2021).

Employee commitment is shown in the ways that employees sacrifice for the good of their organizations and the time that they offer to ensure the success of organizational goals (Vance, 2006). The willingness of such commitment is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic because, as Rudolph et al. (2021) explained, employees are currently attempting to balance the needs of their employer with increased demands of family life and working from home. Additionally, this concept can be seen as a high level of engagement on the part of the employee, which leads to the employee’s willingness to support the organization towards which they feel an emotional attachment (Vance, 2006). To encourage commitment, organizations may look toward the employment type (part-time, full-time, adjunct, etc.) and job design. It has been shown that employees who are less than full-time, permanent employees tend to show lower levels of commitment to their organizations (Kidron, 2018). This lower level of commitment makes sense, considering Vance’s (2006) assertion that employee commitment is often in response to the employees’ feeling of commitment toward them through employer behaviors such as encouraging job security and benefits. Further, Vance explained that job design that encourages autonomy and enrichment supports behaviors of employee commitment. Job design is a concept that is increasingly challenged during a crisis when employees are moved into a virtual environment with little training and often no choice in the matter (Galanti et al., 2021).
All of these factors impact the employees of private higher education institutions in the southeastern United States, affecting overall organizational performance.

Understanding some of the concepts that impact the employee’s ability to sway organizational performance is important. This is especially true for organizational leaders because they have the ability to influence those concepts through specific behaviors. For the leaders of private colleges and universities in the southeastern United States, concepts and theories such as leadership style, transformational leadership theory, and situational leadership theory are helpful when approaching a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The ways that leaders approach challenges during a crisis influences the reactions of their employees, leading to increased or decreased commitment to the organization (Bartsch et al., 2020). Further, Dirani et al. (2020) explained that it is on the shoulders of organizational leaders to provide the strength their organizations need in order to come through the pandemic successfully. Both contingency leadership theory and situational leadership theory encourage organizational leaders to consider the full picture when leading—not simply considering business decisions in a vacuum but taking into account the context of the situation (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). Relating this to the pandemic, a leader who may move from one form of leadership (democratic, autocratic, or others) into a style that considers the current climate will look at the larger implications of policies and decisions. Many scholars have already pointed to the necessity of leaders operating through greater flexibility; these two leadership theories offer insights into ways that such flexibility may be implemented (Dirani et al., 2020; Lagowska et al., 2020; Mather, 2020).

As the importance of organizational flexibility becomes apparent to successfully navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, not only is the approach of leadership important but implementing changes in response to the shifting landscape effectively becomes vital (Mather,
Spector (2013) pointed out that making necessary changes in an organization is difficult for most employees even in the best of times, primarily because of fear and uncertainty. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees faced even greater levels of uncertainty and stress from many areas (Rudolph et al., 2021). Understanding how leadership styles impact change management efforts and how to use change management practices to create an engaged workforce will allow the uncertainty around change to be harnessed into a tool rather than a stumbling block (Sharafizad et al., 2019). However, it is also essential that leaders understand the culture of their organization when attempting to make such necessary changes because organizational culture has shown to be a predictor of an employee’s willingness to not only embrace change but also whether or not the change process will impact employee commitment to the organization (Hurst & Hurst, 2016). Therefore, change may be necessary to survive a crisis, but leaders should not only consider their approach to leadership but also how change is implemented and the organizational culture in which it is to be initiated.

**Summary of the Research Framework**

There were many concepts at play when attempting to understand organizational leadership, employee engagement, and the influence that those concepts had on organizational performance. This became even more complex when employees and leaders worked in environments that were vastly different from what was considered natural or normal. However, from the framework provided, it was possible to break down complex matters into smaller, more easily understood pieces. Through evaluating each of these individually, and also looking at how one concept, construct, actor, or theory can impact the other, the impact on the whole became more evident. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of these interrelated factors.

**Figure 1**
**Definition of Terms**

*Adjunct:* Part-time instructors at institutions of higher education who have specialized knowledge which comes from real-world practice (Henkel & Haley, 2020).

*Change Management:* The multi-step process by which an organization implements change(s) in response both inside and outside the organization in order to gain or maintain a competitive advantage (Aujla & Mclarney, 2020; Lehmann, 2017).

*Employee Commitment:* An employee’s connection to their organization, employer, or managers that are typically classified as affective (emotional attachment to the people), continuance (attachment only until something better comes along), or normative (morally invested and committed; Aujla & Mclarney, 2020; Krajcsák, 2018).
**Employee Engagement:** The willingness of an employee to give their all toward the success of their organization, which is shown through their commitment and performance (Vance, 2006).

**Leadership Coaching:** A specialized training practice for organizational managers at various levels that helps in the transition to new positions, locations, or responsibilities with the goal of increasing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of these leaders (Sherman & Freas, 2004). Coaching also helps to develop leaders to change their leadership behaviors in response to organizational challenges (Kombarakaran et al., 2008).

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs:** The psychological theory developed by Abraham Maslow to explain how people prioritize their needs, first looking to basic needs such as safety before moving toward more complex needs (Upadhyaya, 2014; Warner, 2019).

**Organizational Behavior:** The behaviors, both positive and negative, while working which also includes those practices by organizational leaders to improve upon such behaviors (Neck et al., 2020; Robbins & Coulter, 2018).

**Organizational Resilience:** An organization’s ability to change and adapt in the face of uncertainty (Duchek, 2020).

**Situational Leadership Theory:** Originally developed by Hershey and Blanchard, this approach to leadership explains that the “best” form of leadership is dependent on the situation (Northouse, 2019). This approach to leadership can be considered a subset of contingency leadership theory (Robbins & Coulter, 2018).

**Strategic Planning:** The process that organizations use to develop a long-term plan for an organization, linking actions to its mission and vision and plans for the future (Stephens, 2017).
It is through strategic planning that organizations are able to create an adaptable plan which provides them with a competitive advantage (Porter, 1999; Tatton, 2020).

*Virtual Environment:* The environment where employees perform remote work using various technologies outside of the traditional, physical office setting (Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

**Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations**

This section reviews the basic assumptions, limitations, and delimitations for this study. Assumptions are aspects of the study that are considered to be truth (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). These are the ideas that the researcher may take for granted as being absolute. Limitations are those features of the study that the researcher cannot control and therefore have the potential to lessen the impact of the findings (Kornuta & Germaine, 2019). Understanding the limitations of the study allows the researcher to know the weaknesses entering the research. Finally, the delimitations are the means by which the study is bounded (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). By establishing boundaries, researchers are able to manage the study without being overwhelmed by the task before them (Kornuta & Germaine, 2019).

**Assumptions**

It was assumed that interviewees would provide truthful information. To encourage participants to present their true selves during interviews and other document gathering exercises such as surveys, I utilized pseudonyms and anonymized the participants and their institutions in the study (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2014). The need to protect the confidentiality of both the participants and their institutions is due to the fact that it may be possible to distinguish participants based on their administrative role in the organization (Ellersgaard et al., 2021). Further, as Seidman (2013) suggested, multiple participants were interviewed, allowing for greater reliability of the information provided. It was also assumed that the information gathered
in this qualitative, multiple case study would not be generalizable, due to the small sample size. However, it was assumed that themes generated through this research study would provide insights that may be used for engaging employees who transition to a virtual environment for various reasons. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) explained, the goal of this qualitative dissertation was transferability where the study offered insights so that others in similar situations could apply the information gained through the research.

**Limitations**

The nature of this study created limitations from the outset. Because this was a case study with a limited number of participants, the ability to generalize the findings is not possible. However, by using the multiple case study approach, it is my hope that while it was not possible to generalize the results externally, it would be possible to draw generalizations internally, or within the same settings that the research was conducted (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Additionally, as this study was looking specifically at private higher education institutions in the southeast United States, information gained from these participants may not be applicable to others. While it may not be possible to generalize data across institutions or regions, the researcher sought to offer transferability, which would allow the information gained through this research to be used in other, similar situations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). A final limitation to this study lies in its timing. The timing of the COVID-19 pandemic was both long ago and also still occurring. Many educational leaders have been working in-depth to address this crisis for over 2 years. It was concerning that memories of those participants were compromised by the time that had passed and the many events that had taken place since the beginning of the crisis. However, while conducting interviews, I sought to have participants use more than their memories to reconstruct the events through the use of direct questions (Seidman, 2013).
**Delimitations**

The primary delimitations of this study were the geographic region and the academic institutions selected for the study. Specifically, this research study focused on private, not-for-profit higher education institutions in the southeast United States. In addition to the region, the time frame for this study served as a delimitation, as the research was focused on practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Significance of the Study**

This research study was found to be significant for multiple reasons. Primarily, as Lagowska et al. (2020) explained, the guarantee of a crisis is that one will always exist. Because the threat of crisis is always at hand, it is important for leaders to know not only how to weather the storm but also how to develop a framework where employees will be highly successful, even providing a competitive advantage to the organization. While it is my greatest hope that the world will not face another pandemic like the one that shut the world down in 2020, many areas have faced crises that closed regions on a smaller scale. The information gained in this study may help higher education institutions maintain the productivity of their employees in areas that are rapidly forced to move to a virtual environment.

**Reduction of Gaps in the Literature**

Prior to this study, there were significant gaps in the literature surrounding the challenges of organizational leaders of private higher educational institutions in the southeastern United States to effectively oversee and engage employees during a rapid transition to a virtual environment due to a crisis. Gustafson and Haque (2020) found that leaders of K–12 institutions face many, significant challenges related to virtual instruction and the misconceptions surrounding this learning environment; however, their study focused primarily on principals of
virtual schools in the K–12 sector. While some aspects of this study may provide insights into the challenges faced by organizational leaders of higher educational institutions, an in-depth study of higher education will allow for a greater understanding of the challenges these leaders face in the midst of crisis. Further, the majority of research surrounding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher educational institutions has focused on the mental health of students, the financial impact of the virus, and the importance of improved online delivery of course content (Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Burki, 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). Very little research has been conducted on the challenges of higher education leadership to weather this storm, which includes all of these impediments and more. Indeed, Lagowska et al. (2020) pointed out that the information available for how leaders tackle such challenges is presently quite limited. As such, this study offered the opportunity to increase knowledge and awareness surrounding the challenges faced by these organizational leaders when overseeing and engaging their employees.

**Implications for Biblical Integration**

The multiple case study design approach for this study was selected specifically because I desired to ensure reliability and validity. I have firmly stood by Jesus’s command to the disciples in Mark 9:35: “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (*New International Bible*, 1978/2011). This research was conducted first as a work for God, but then also as a service to others. As such, it was vital that the content could be seen as reliable and also valid or “accurate, or correct, or true” (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 169). As such, this research was conducted in accordance with Romans 12:10–11, which says, “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (*New International Bible*, 1978/2011).
As a service to others, I sought to empower organizational leaders in their purpose. Second Timothy 3:16-17 explains that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (New International Bible, 1978/2011). Therefore, much as God gave dominion over the garden in Genesis 1, organizational leaders have power over and responsibility for their employees. Keller (2012) explained that because of this responsibility, the gardener-leader must care for and create an environment where the garden of employees can thrive. Through the insights developed from this study, organizational leaders may be empowered to face the challenges that are brought about by a crisis, forcing employees to quickly transition to a virtual environment.

Furthering the idea of organizational leaders in the role of one who has dominion and responsibility over staff, Esther may serve as a biblical role model. Those people who are in leadership of organizations during a period of crisis may need to consider that, much like Esther, they have been placed in their positions for what they can bring to the situation (New International Bible, 1978/2011, Esther 4:14). Esther was placed in a leadership role during a period of tribulation for her people, and she acted accordingly, stepping out of her zone of comfort to do what was needed for her people to survive.

**Benefit to Business Practice and Relationship to Cognate**

The focus of this research study was to gain insights into the challenges faced by organizational leaders. In doing so, this qualitative study attempted to increase knowledge in the field of leadership. Tourish (2020) posited that the COVID-19 pandemic presented not only a crisis of leadership but also a crisis in regard to leadership theory. Leadership theories were put to the test, and this period has offered researchers the opportunity to discover successful
leadership traits. Similarly, Lagowska et al. (2020) explained that leaders face significant challenges during crisis periods and that many leaders fail because they do not possess the necessary attributes to thrive while opening the door to others who are able to weather such a storm.

This qualitative research study sought to understand the challenges of organizational leaders at private higher educational institutions who oversaw and engaged employees rapidly transitioning to a remote environment due to the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, specific leadership theories were examined, including Hershey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory (Northouse, 2019), which argues that the context of the situation should impact the approach of organizational leaders. Further, transformational leadership theory suggests that through leadership, both the employee and leader are transformed into much more highly effective versions of themselves and looks to the value of relationships at encouraging this change (Harb et al., 2020).

To support leadership practice, I considered the implication of these leadership theories while also investigated the actions of organizational leaders of higher education institutions. Such areas which may be necessary to successful leadership during crisis periods include effective change management techniques, strategic planning, and staff development. In addition to this, the impact of an organizational leader's understanding of organizational behavior is necessary as they navigate the uncertainty surrounding a crisis.

**Summary of the Significance of the Study**

This study contributed to the gaps in current knowledge in the area of leadership. Specifically, this study investigated leadership theories, concepts in change management, staff development, and strategic planning to determine how leaders of higher education institutions
were able to best oversee and engage employees who transitioned to virtual environments during a crisis. While global pandemics may be rare, higher education institutions may experience more localized crises and may benefit from the knowledge gained through this qualitative research study. Similar studies have already begun in the K–12 sector and in other industries. However, information on higher education institutions has been limited to studies on student mental health and improving academic quality. This study sought to reduce that gap in knowledge.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the need for a greater understanding of the difficulties encountered by organizational leaders in managing and engaging a workforce during crises. Dirani et al. (2020) argued that the pandemic has shown to be a test of the leadership practices around the world, noting that at the time of their study, a high number of organizations were facing bankruptcy, with many more expected to follow. This study was directed by existing research in several areas including leadership practices, employee engagement, and virtual work environments. A subset of this research includes overviews of contingent and situational leadership theories, employee commitment, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and efforts to support change management in organizations. This literature review will show how these concepts are interconnected and how they relate to the research questions posed in this study. Further, through this study, the gap in the literature regarding leadership practices directed toward the management and engagement of the workforce during crises was reduced. This study’s specific focus on higher education institutions reduced a gap in that literature which has primarily focused on either K–12 institutions or the student perspective of the pandemic (Gustafson & Haque, 2020; Ślaski et al., 2020).
Business Practices

There are several business practices that are typically found within successful organizations. However, these come into a much greater light during periods of crisis. Some of these include the role of organizational leaders, the importance of leadership coaching and staff development, the impact of strategic planning and change management techniques, and the impact of overall organizational behavior. This section explains each of these in greater detail and highlights their relationship to organizational success during periods of crisis.

Leadership Role. Northouse (2019) has defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 5). This definition recognizes that leadership is not characterized by a particular trait or a specific behavior, but rather by the interaction that takes place between the leader and their followers. The approach to leadership as a process rather than a group of personal characteristics is important because it acknowledges that the role of leader is available to all people, regardless of personal qualities or formal rank.

Generally, leaders provide direction and a pathway toward established goals for their organizations (Daft, 2016). In a time of crisis, however, the importance of this role is magnified. Indeed, there may be nowhere that the significance of leadership is more obvious than during crises (Bundy et al., 2017). As Lagowska et al. (2020) explained, during crises, the impact of leadership rests in the idea that this is the person or group to whom others look to for “guidance, comfort, hope, and accurate information” (p. 1). This idea of guidance in the face of uncertainty is echoed by Kouzes and Posner (2017), who point to leadership as a study of a leader and their ability to influence and inspire followers as they address the challenges of an uncertain world.

For the organization and its stakeholders to endure crises, leaders must look into the uncertainty
of the situation and seek out meaning, thus determining a pathway forward (Goleman et al., 2001; Lagowska et al., 2020). The role of leadership within an organization is essential, even in the best of times. However during crises, leadership, specifically effective leadership that is capable of providing guidance in an unpredictable environment, is invaluable (Bundy et al., 2017; Lagowska et al., 2020).

**Leadership Coaching.** Recognizing the importance of effective leadership during a crisis, organizations must develop leaders who are capable of leading through difficult times. Bundy et al. (2017) explained that the decision-making abilities of leaders are negatively impacted by crisis situations. Further, the authors point out that, during these periods, it is easy for leadership to fall back on practices that had sustained the organization in earlier times when the organization was thriving. However, during a crisis, these behaviors may not be as effective because they hinder the organization’s ability to offer creative solutions to difficult problems. Considering the importance of a leader’s capacity to make good decisions that help successfully weather a crisis, organizations need to find a means for developing leadership skills. Rekalde et al. (2017) found executive coaching to be one of the most effective training practices to modify leadership behavior.

One of the key strengths of this form of leadership development is the ability to personalize training, based on the specific needs of the person or organization (Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Rekalde et al., 2017). The ability to target particular needs is important because as Dirani et al. (2020) explained, crises such as the recent pandemic have shown that those leadership behaviors which proved successful in normal operations may not be sufficient in periods of unrest. Indeed, the authors argued that business failures were on the rise during the pandemic because leaders did not possess the required skills to guide their organizations through
such a challenging period. However, coaching offers such leaders an opportunity to work with a coach in a reflective manner, allowing them to gain real-time feedback and strengthen their ability to think critically and address the constant change that a crisis presents (Kombarakaran et al., 2008).

During a crisis, organizations face unique challenges originating from both inside and outside of their operations (Dirani et al., 2020). However, leadership coaching offers organizations the ability to improve functionality within the organization through improving the flexibility of decision-making, thereby strengthening the relationships between management and workers (Jones et al., 2016). Further, leadership coaching has been shown to improve organizational productivity, indicating that this development tool also strengthens the organization’s outward measures (Trevillion, 2018).

While there are indicators that leadership coaching could prove highly effective in developing skills for managers operating in crises, it is also important to consider possible drawbacks to this method. It has been argued that the research in the area of leadership coaching is thin and that specific outcomes of the practice are not easily quantified (Albizu et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2016). However, the area of leadership coaching is part of a growing body of knowledge and through its highly customizable nature and direct application, it offers organizational leaders a powerful tool in combatting the challenges presented by crisis situations (Rekalde et al., 2017).

**Staff Development.** Garavan et al. (2001) described staff development as training focused on improving the competencies of workers to allow them greater versatility and thus improving organizational performance. Webb (2013) took this definition further including the benefit to the worker, noting that it involves training that not only supports organizational
performance but also serves the interests of the employee. Interestingly, the idea of a mutually beneficial development process has not been commonplace in the college or university, one area where the primary purpose of the organization is focused on learning (McCaffery, 2019). There are several reasons for this, the primary one of which includes the traditional idea of training as being lower-level, functional activities and also the concept that these organizations are staffed by those who do the teaching rather than a place of learning for all. M. T. Miller (2021) echoed this claim, noting that, while higher education institutions operate functionally as a center for learning, they are not often viewed as learning organizations. However, learning organizations support institutional flexibility, thus increasing their ability to withstand uncertainty.

Much like leadership coaching has the potential to support organizational leaders in times of crisis, staff development may help to create a more resilient workforce. As Bundy et al. (2017) posited, a more resilient workforce can more easily withstand a crisis. One way that organizations may invest in workplace resiliency is through the development of their employees. Indeed, Galanti et al. (2021) encouraged training that supports employees’ ability to self-govern to maintain engagement and resiliency during a crisis. Further, when employees are asked to take on new tasks or function using greater independence, leaders cannot expect success without first providing sufficient training (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). It is through this training that organizations are able to increase their reliability.

Organizations that possess high reliability navigate crises more successfully; the key characteristics of such organizations include flexibility, coordination, and being effective at communicating change (Bundy et al., 2017). To increase an organization’s reliability, efforts should be encouraged toward greater organizational learning, which Malik and Garg (2017) explained as a process that aligns employee development practices with the mission and goals of
the organization. Further, embracing a learning organization model is shown to create greater engagement within the workforce. This engagement may be especially valuable during crises when organizations need the competitive advantage provided by employees who show greater commitment and willingness to work beyond what is expected of them (Sharafizad et al., 2019). Indeed, staff development efforts are known to both create and retain employees who show higher levels of commitment and innovation, allowing for greater productivity within the organization (Daft, 2016; Malik & Garg, 2017).

**Strategic Planning.** Strategic planning has been described as a process that organizations go through to explore their mission, vision, and goals to ensure that they are prepared for the future of the industry where they operate (Aljuhmani & Emeagwali, 2017). As a discipline, strategic planning has its roots dating back to the Grecian armies who placed a strategist in their highest role of general. One of the key benefits to strategic planning is that it allows organizations to bring together all aspects of their business to incorporate them into future planning activities. In its modern form, strategic planning has evolved from a process called the Harvard Policy Model, where companies bring together their resources to enact a future vision (Candy & Gordon, 2011).

Aljuhmani and Emeagwali (2017) claimed that strong strategic planning which considers the uncertainty of the modern world strengthens an organization’s ability to survive the challenges presented by crisis periods. As Stephens (2017) noted, an organization’s strategy will change as its environment changes, which is an important consideration but also a challenge to those tasked with such planning. It is for this reason that Stephens suggested greater flexibility in strategic planning and encouraged what she refers to as planning with “broad brushstrokes,” which provide a general vision or idea of direction while allowing room for how those plans will
be enacted. This approach also provides opportunities for modification as the environment surrounding the organization changes.

A key to the success of strategic planning is found in the inclusion of employees throughout the organization as it increases employee support and engagement to develop and enact the activities created in the strategic planning process (Aljuhmani & Emeagwali, 2017; Davis, 2020). Bryson et al. (2018) explained that one reason for this is that employees who are included in the planning process take greater ownership of the plan that is developed. This ownership leads to employees who are vested in the success of the plan. Additionally, the authors suggested that the inclusion of a wider variety of workers leads to a greater understanding of the organization, which results in the development of a richer strategic plan. Davis (2020) suggested a process called appreciative inquiry to inspire positive discussion of an organization’s strategic plan. This process allows organizations to approach strategic planning from the perspective of where the organization succeeded rather than focusing on failures. By using appreciative inquiry, employees become engaged in the process of strategic planning and are focused on positive opportunities rather than negative failures.

A committed, productive workforce is especially important during crises, which are known for high levels of volatility (Bundy et al., 2017). During a crisis, organizational leadership must operate in an atmosphere of high levels of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) where they are expected to map out a course for the organization, not only through the crisis but also in planning for the future (Lagowska et al., 2020). According to Schoemaker et al. (2018), an organization’s ability to thrive, even in VUCA environments, centers on the ability to be innovative, taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves, and the establishment of processes and plans that allow for such behavior. Daft
(2016) confirmed this, noting that when organizations are facing highly changeable environments externally, proper planning helps smooth the path for any necessary changes. It is further argued that through planning, organizations are more prepared to respond in uncertain situations (Bundy et al., 2017; Daft, 2016).

**Change Management.** Change within an organization is described as “the adoption of a new idea or behavior” (Daft, 2016, p. 426). As such, the ways that organizations implement this change reflects their approach to change management, which may be a response to internal or external factors. Sartori et al. (2018) posited that, for an organization to succeed, it must be able to sustain innovation and change in response to its environment. This is especially true during periods of high uncertainty (Schoemaker et al., 2018).

Kotter (2014) pointed to an 8-step process toward instigating change. This process includes (a) creating a sense of urgency, (b) building a guiding coalition, (c) forming a vision for change and strategic initiatives, (d) enlisting a volunteer army, (e) enabling action by removing barriers, (f) generating short term wins, (g) sustaining acceleration, and (h) instituting change (Kotter, 2014, pp. 21–23). Kotter (2014) explained that as each of these processes function optimally, the next step in the process flows easily. For example, with a strong vision and sense of urgency, the volunteer army is more easily assembled. Because of the importance of vision and setting direction, leadership which is capable of providing this is essential to the process of sustaining this change.

A consideration in planning for uncertainty is the need to make changes necessary for the organization to successfully respond to changes in its volatile environment. This need for organizations to develop flexibility is echoed in a call by Bundy et al. (2017) for organizations to create environments that allow for greater ingenuity and innovation. However, Bundy et al. noted
that crises may cause those within the organization to attempt to rely on previous practices as a safe response to the unknown. Resistance to and fear of change is not uncommon and is something organizations should account for when planning for the future (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019; Spector, 2013). Indeed, Spector (2013) explained that it is not the change itself that employees typically resist, but instead, the organization’s process for implementing change. Therefore, the approach an organization takes toward change management is imperative. Change management, or implementation is thought of as the process that an organization takes to enact changes in line with the institution’s strategic plan.

Because of the chance for employee resistance to change, it is vital that when an organization faces the need for change, it develops a plan to communicate such change in a way that is personalized for all employees (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). Fugate and Soenen (2018) posited that employees evaluate the changes taking place within their organization and attempt to determine whether the outcome of the change will benefit or harm them and then base their reaction to the change on this determination. As such, plans should account for the fact that not all employees will react in the same way and work to communicate changes in the most individualized way possible, offering greater persuasion to those employees who have indicated more resistance to change (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). Finally, the commitment encouraged by the organization should be considered because both affective commitment and normative commitment, or commitment based on relationships and commitment based on a moral code, are shown to increase support for change (Shin et al., 2015).

In addition to approaches that emphasize communication, organizational leadership is key in encouraging employees to commit to the changes necessary to sustain the organization (Dallavalle, 1991). Indeed, Shin et al. (2015) encouraged organizational leaders to embrace
behaviors that increase employee support for change efforts, including increasing affective commitment and individualized efforts toward change. While Aujla and Mclarney (2020) indicated that organizational change may impact employee commitment, efforts to increase commitment prior to change actually support employees through organizational change and increase the efforts of management. In this sense, increasing employee commitment should not simply be an afterthought used to bolster change efforts.

**Organizational Behavior.** To gauge how employees may react to changes in their environment, it is helpful to examine the organizational behavior of employees. The study of organizational behavior focuses on increasing knowledge concerning how employees act in group settings and the ways that organizations can increase engagement and the positive behaviors of their workers (Neck et al., 2020). Through understanding the organizational behavior of one’s own organization, leaders are able to gain insights into the emotions behind the actions of their employees and then use those insights to direct the actions of employees toward a productive end (Neck et al., 2020; Saintilan & Schreiber, 2017).

A key aspect of organizational behavior is the interdisciplinary nature of its development, which includes concepts from sociology, anthropology, economics, industrial engineering, medicine, and psychology, the discipline from which it draws most heavily (McKenna, 2020). Each of these approaches to studying organizational behavior seeks to understand employee engagement, motivation, and overall behavior from differing perspectives. For example, from the perspective of industrial engineering, the focus leans more heavily on the processes of task completion. Alternatively, the psychological perspective looks more deeply into the individual and how interactions with group members influence motivation. Because of the multidisciplinary approach to understanding organizational behavior, many aspects of an organization are
examined in this field; from job and organization design to the culture of the organization and its
approach to change management, all aspects of an organization are found to influence
organizational behavior. Even employee stress is a consideration of organizational behavior,
which is especially important when considering a workforce which has been forced to transition
to remote operations without sufficient training or guidance (Bartsch et al., 2020).

This knowledge helps to guide the changes necessary to allow for a high-reliability
organization, which values the engagement of employees (Bundy et al., 2017). An approach to
crises that includes the perspective of organizational behavior also allows organizations to
recognize that these situations create instability in the organizational environment as well as its
workforce (Dirani et al., 2020). This approach also acknowledges that the way the organization
responds to a crisis can impact its employees’ reactions (Bundy et al., 2017; Dirani et al., 2020).
Further, through an understanding of organizational behavior, organizational leaders will have a
better grasp of their workforce and the means by which to motivate employees during periods of
change (Saintilan & Schreiber, 2017).

The Problem

Higher education institutions have faced many significant challenges as a result of the
COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders of these institutions were not only forced to work quickly to
return students to their homes and decide a path to continue educational opportunities for
students, but they were also responsible for accommodating the need for workers to quarantine
by shifting operations into a virtual environment. Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a
destabilization of academic institutions and their workers and the need for leadership capable of
sustaining the organization through such a crisis (Dirani et al., 2020).
Employee perception of a crisis situation is influenced by many factors, including the timing and transparency of communication and the actions of leadership (Lagowska et al., 2020). Workers, by judging the levels of optimism from their leadership, will gain optimism themselves. As such, the role of leadership is vital during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to workers’ perceptions about crisis situations, the addition of technology provides new and unique challenges for leaders. While technology allowed workers to move their offices to their homes, it has presented additional challenges, the primary of which is that these workers did not have a say in their shift to remote work. This move to remote environments caused difficulty for leaders in their ability to engage, oversee, and manage their employees.

The required quarantines associated with the COVID-19 pandemic forced workers in all areas to transition to virtual work environments with little to no time for preparation or training (Galanti et al., 2021). Under typical circumstances, a worker chooses to work remotely, with support in place from their organization to increase the employee’s ability to manage their work–life balance while maintaining productivity. This was not the process that took place in response to the pandemic, however. Instead, workers were placed in situations where they had no training or advance guidance on how to deal with the social isolation or the internal conflict between their family and work lives. Both of these triggers, social isolation and family-work conflict, are decreased the engagement and productivity of workers who transitioned to virtual environments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bartsch et al. (2020) suggested that employees look to leaders to guide them through the challenges of such a crisis. COVID-19 brought on events that leaders were not prepared to address, especially in education, where organizational survival relied on the ability to alter practices and processes in response to the situation. Employees were asked to complete job
functions in ways very different from what was considered normal practice. As such, there is a need for greater understanding in the area of leadership during crisis, especially for workers who are forced to transition to virtual work environments.

**Concepts**

**Organizational Performance is Related to Employee Engagement.** There are many aspects that play a role in employee work performance and the leadership necessary to provide the optimum outcome for organizations functioning during crises. Some concepts like organizational citizenship behavior are common and are found to impact the organization whether during a crisis or not (Hamsani et al., 2019). However, there are concepts like specific leadership competencies for organizations in crisis that have emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizations have long found a competitive advantage through fostering a more engaged workforce (Vance, 2006). Sharafizad et al. (2019) explained that employee engagement contributes to discretionary effort, or the idea of “going the extra mile,” gives organizations a greater advantage. A key reason for this is that because employees are willing to complete tasks outside of their job role, fewer resources must be spent on mundane tasks. In times of crisis, when institutions need a workforce devoted to supporting the organization and exhibiting innovative behaviors, employee engagement is key to withstanding challenges that arise (Hamsani et al., 2019).

The ability to harness and create an engaged workforce rests in the hands of organizational leaders (Hamsani et al., 2019; Sharafizad et al., 2019). According to Sharafizad et al. (2019), the willingness of employees to go beyond their expected duties is greatly influenced by the leader–employee relationship. Those employees who feel a greater connection with their
leaders find themselves more willing to exhibit discretionary effort. Further, Hamsani et al. (2019) noted that leadership impacts an employee’s organizational citizenship behavior, and transformational leaders inspire higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior than those leaders who take a more autocratic approach.

While employee engagement is a key factor in organizational success, it is also vital that leaders understand the demand that such behavior places on their workers. Employee engagement and its closely related concept organizational citizenship behavior have been shown to create employee burnout and difficulties in work–life balance (Deery et al., 2017; Hamsani et al., 2019). The negative impact on employee well-being of high levels of employee engagement may be compounded by the challenges faced by workers during a crisis (Weiss & Li, 2020).

**Employee Engagement is Related to Employee Satisfaction and Needs.** With the value of an engaged workforce established, the question then refocuses on how organizations can inspire such engagement among their employees. Robbins and Coulter (2018) explained that employee satisfaction drives productivity and employee engagement. Considering this, employers must pay attention to the needs of employees. Further, to ensure employee engagement, it is important to recognize that workers seek satisfaction with both their job and work environments (Shantz et al., 2013).

There are certain aspects of an employee's job and work environment that lead to higher levels of engagement. These include job autonomy, design, and the atmosphere in which an employee is working (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Galanti et al., 2021; Shantz et al., 2013). Job autonomy is the level of individual decision-making an employee has related to their work and is shown to be directly related to employee satisfaction and engagement (Galanti et al., 2021; Shantz et al., 2013). Additionally, Shantz et al. (2013) found that a variety in work tasks
increases engagement as it creates more challenging and thus engaging work activities. However, it is also important that work is not too challenging, as this leads to increased stress rather than engagement. It is important, then, that consideration is given to the employee’s job design, so that the employee sees their position as both unique and challenging (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Shantz et al., 2013). This approach will make the employee feel both valuable and enthusiastic about their work and contribution to the organization without creating undue stress, which would negatively impact engagement.

Employees’ work environment is also a key factor in work engagement. Diamantidis and Chatzoglou (2019) posited that an employee’s productivity and engagement are directly related to their job environment. Indeed, the conditions in which employees work are shown to impact not only their welfare but also their performance on the job (Galanti et al., 2021). The impact of work environment on employee engagement became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where workers were forced to work from home while managing a household with family members who were also attempting to work and school from home. This created work environments that were highly distracting, decreasing worker engagement and productivity.

**Virtual Environments Impact Employee Engagement.** A crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic has not been experienced by organizations in recent history. Because of this, many organizations were forced to develop new strategies that furthered the institution’s goals while also maintaining their workforce during national and global lockdowns. One of the primary options that many businesses turned to was the ability for their workers to complete their tasks remotely through the use of technology. Allowing employees to work from home enables organizations to not only maintain continuity of services during a crisis but also transition back to on-site operations at the conclusion of the crisis (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020).
However, technology itself brings with it challenges that should be considered when moving employees to a virtual work environment. Maioli (2018) explained that the user interface of technology will influence whether or not the user readily accepts and uses the technology. As such, complex technologies that are newly adopted may create lower engagement from employees who are resistant to its use. Additionally, virtual environments bring the added challenge of technological issues, distractions from home, and issues with how workers engage with one another and their leaders (Panteli et al., 2019). For example, Rudolph et al. (2021) explain that, for those employees whose preference is greater separation between work and home lives, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased stress and made it more difficult for the workers to create clear a distinction between their times at work and home.

While the use of technology presents challenges, the mere need for such tools may create difficulty and stress for many employees who never planned to work from home. These employees may not have access to the appropriate space, technological tools, or supplies to perform their work to the best of their ability (Rudolph et al., 2021). For this reason, support from an organization’s information technology and other support offices is essential to increase employee confidence through training and support (Ojo et al., 2021). This is difficult for many organizations, however, because they never planned for situations such as this because the possibility of an entire workforce moving to remote work was considered to be very slight (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020).

The Needs of Employees Are Impacted by Crisis Situations. The concept of distractions in the work environment is especially true in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has forced employees to complete their work tasks while also addressing needs in their personal lives such as homeschooling children and sharing technologies, (e.g.,
internet and computers) with partners who are also working from home (Huber & Helm, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021). Additionally, as Rudolph et al. (2021) explained, employees who do not typically work in a virtual environment may initially face difficulties in self-organizing to appropriate enough time each day to address all of their commitments—both personal and professional.

In addition to the stress of balancing their work and home lives in a virtual environment, employees also face greater feelings of social isolation. These higher levels of social isolation stem from decreases in interpersonal contact between co-workers and supervisors (Wiradendi et al., 2020). Because of the inability of co-workers to interact outside of the virtual setting, it is more difficult for employees to establish and maintain the relationships that help to create deeper engagement with their work (Panteli et al., 2019; Rudolph et al., 2021). This decrease in engagement stems from workers no longer feeling that they have the same collaborative resources found in face-to-face work with co-workers (Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

Moreover, organizational leaders have found that the needs of their employees are shifting in response to the crisis (Lagowska et al., 2020). Because of the pandemic, workers are now faced with challenges to their safety including their health, job, and economic security (Ryan et al., 2020). This has caused employees who had previously focused on higher levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, like esteem and self-actualization, to revert to lower levels including safety and physiological needs. The result of this is that workers are not able to devote the same amount of focus to their work as they were prior to the crisis. While virtual work environments present various challenges to organizations and employees, they do offer employees a sense of safety by allowing them to social distance, as well as job security by ensuring that they are able to continue earning a wage (Wiradendi et al., 2020).
Theories

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. This theory proposed that there are five human needs that can be arranged in a tiered approach (Maslow, 1943). Further, Maslow suggested that these needs are arranged in a hierarchy, where the more basic needs must be met before a person is able to focus on higher-level needs. According to Maslow, the needs that make up the tiered hierarchy include physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization.

Physiological needs include such things as food, water, and rest and are shown in Figure 2 as the base of the pyramidal hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). Physical safety, security, and stability are described as safety needs, which may manifest in the type of job a person takes or the area where they may choose to live. Love needs are indicated as a sense of belonging and companionship and are something beyond a simple physical indication or feeling. Esteem needs are broken into two groups: adequacy and reputation; the first indicates the more internal drivers for independence and ability while the second is more concerned with recognition by others. Finally, the need for self-actualization is indicated by reaching one’s fullest potential and is signified by its placement at the top of the hierarchy pyramid in Figure 2.
The COVID-19 pandemic brought Maslow’s hierarchy of needs into great focus with many researchers pointing to its implications in regard to human behavior in the face of crisis (Church & Ezama, 2020; Ryan et al., 2020; Wiradendi et al., 2020). Church and Ezama (2020) suggested that the unknown nature of the crisis has caused many workers to revert back to lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy, focusing on physiological and safety needs, resulting in decreased engagement as workers shift their motivation away from levels such as esteem. However, as organizations transition to a virtual work environment, many workers are finding increased security in the face of their lower-level needs, which may allow them to then move back into higher levels of motivation (Wiradendi et al., 2020). Organizations may want to consider Maslow’s hierarchy of needs while operating in a virtual environment. As the need for love focuses on a person’s sense of belonging, the isolation that comes from working in a virtual environment may be of concern with regard to employee motivation and engagement (Yarberry & Sims, 2021).
Situational Leadership Theory. Situational leadership theory was first introduced by Hersey and Blanchard and suggests that the context of the situation should be considered when determining the most appropriate leadership style (Northouse, 2019). According to this leadership theory, leaders who are capable of adapting their methods to the situation will be the most effective at influencing followers. This method explains that there are four leadership styles that may be used, based on the needs of followers. The first leadership style is high directive, low supportive, where employees require greater structure and direct instructions for how to complete their goals. Next is high directive, high supportive, which incorporates more feedback and responsiveness to the needs of followers while also providing a highly structured environment. High supportive, low directive is the third leadership style. In this approach, leaders are more focused on encouraging employees to succeed utilizing their own skills and mostly provide feedback and suggestions. The final leadership style is the low supportive, low directive approach, where the leader uses a much more hands-off method and cedes most of the power to their followers.

The second component of situational leadership theory is the developmental level of the employee, which is found to be fluid based on the knowledge and level of commitment of workers (Northouse, 2019). This concept is also broken into three categories: low competence/high commitment, some competence/low commitment, moderate competence/variable commitment, and high competence/high commitment. Leaders will look to where an employee falls in these categories and determine the most appropriate leadership style. For example, an employee with low competence and high commitment may need greater structure and support because, though they are engaged in the work, they do not have a great
understanding of the task to be completed. This worker would need more directive and supportive leadership compared to an employee who is high in competence and commitment.

Wisittigars and Siengthai (2019) suggested that, in periods of crisis, situational leadership is highly effective because these leaders have honed specific competencies such as business and people management and decision-making. Further, this leadership style emphasizes the leader–follower relationship as it requires the leader to have great awareness of the needs of followers and an understanding of where they are on the developmental continuum (Northouse, 2019). Situational leadership, then, attempts to meet the need for a leader–follower relationship that encourages affective commitment of workers and thus encourages greater commitment to the organization and motivation of employees (Krajcsák, 2018; Sharafizad et al., 2019). Specific to crisis situations where employees have a greater likelihood of looking to organizational leaders for guidance and structure, situational leadership appears to be a viable option for success in managing the unknown (Lagowska et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021). Indeed, Bartsch et al. (2020) argued that the approach taken by organizational leaders has the ability to help their institution survive periods of high uncertainty, no matter how severe the crisis.

Possible drawbacks to situational leadership include the general ambiguity of the concept and how leaders fully determine the development level of followers (Northouse, 2019). While ambiguity may be a positive aspect to some as it allows greater flexibility, the lack of guidance may prove challenging for those new to leadership, especially in periods of uncertainty. As leaders are already facing the challenges of constantly assessing new threats to their institutions and attempting to make decisions based on the current crisis situation, adding an additional level of vague complexity may be overwhelming (Lagowska et al., 2020; Northouse, 2019). It is
important to realize that organizational leaders are workers too and thus susceptible to the same emotional triggers and stressors as their employees (Bartsch et al., 2020).

**Transformational Leadership Theory.** Northouse (2019) defined transformational leadership as an approach to leadership that increases the motivation of workers and is based on the development of relationships between the parties. Transformational leadership focuses on the development and empowerment of employees to allow them to rise to greater heights, thus increasing motivation and engagement. This form of leadership differentiates between leading and managing, noting that leading is more than simply ensuring workers complete tasks; it moves deeper into the area of motivation and morale (Burns, 2003). Through transformational leadership, both the worker and leader are pushed to higher levels of motivation. The process of transformational leadership begins with having workers recognize and embrace the vision and goals of the organization; next leadership works to motivate employees to work toward the shared vision and goals, and finally, it allows the employees to function at a higher level than they were previously capable. This model of leadership closely follows the ideas of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where once the employee attains a certain level, they are then able to move to higher levels (Izzah et al., 2020). However, transformational leadership has the same primary drawback found with situational leadership: ambiguity. Although this method is found to be highly effective, due to its broad nature, it can be overwhelming for leaders who have not had previous exposure to its methods.

In discussing transformational leadership, it is important to also consider the implications of charismatic leadership and pseudo-transformational leadership. Northouse (2019) explained the need for this distinction because the implication of transformational leadership is that it raises followers up to a higher moral standard than they held previously. However, other leaders have
transformed followers in a decidedly opposite direction, as with political leaders such as Adolf Hitler or cult leaders such as David Koresh and Jim Jones. Therefore, this distinction of pseudo-transformational leadership, which does not incorporate these aspects of higher moral leaning or behavior for the greater good, was established. Alternatively, charisma is seen as a trait belonging to a transformational leader. This leader is typically seen to possess certain characteristics such as high moral leaning. Additionally, the charismatic leader encourages followers toward a specific vision while setting specific expectations for followers.

Izzah et al. (2020) theorized that leaders who are focused on creating a shared vision and empowering workers are more effective at creating a motivated workforce than those who seek to motivate through rewards or punishments. Further, transformational leaders have been found to inspire greater organizational commitment and are more effective at motivating workers toward change (Harb et al., 2020). Research by R. Miller (2021) indicates that this form of leadership decreases the likelihood of workers leaving their jobs to seek employment elsewhere. As such, transformational leadership may help to combat continuance commitment, which is signified by workers who are only committed to their organization until a better offer is made (Krajcsák, 2018).

**Constructs**

**Organizational Change.** Fugate and Soenen (2018) argued that “employees are the ultimate determinants of successful organizational change” (p. 123). Considering this, it is essential for organizational leaders to determine the best ways to encourage the support of employees in change efforts. The most supportive employees in a change situation are those who champion the change rather than simply comply with it. These change champions are more likely to go beyond what is expected of them to support the change, rather than simply accepting the
Employees who champion change often have a higher level of organizational commitment, as Aujla and Mclarney (2020) explained, because high levels of employee commitment typically lead to a greater willingness to support and promote change. Recognizing its value in the success of change management efforts, encouraging employee commitment to the change should be an important area of focus for organizational leaders.

Change management support becomes an area of specific interest for organizations who are facing periods of uncertainty where employees’ championing the change is especially important (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). Organizational leaders find that there are several activities they control that can support change management. These include effective communication, the establishment of trust, and building quality relationships with employees (Aujla & Mclarney, 2020; Fugate & Soenen, 2018). Because fear is one of the most common responses to change, leaders who communicate in an open and transparent way find that employees are more receptive to changes (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). Further, in an attempt to build on the relationship with employees, organizations should make efforts to ensure that communication is tailored to the needs and expectations of workers. Attempts towards transparency not only support employees’ understanding of the changes to be made but also help to develop trust, which is one of the key attributes of successful change management (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019; Tucker, 2017).

Leadership Style. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic caught many organizational leaders off guard and forced them into uncomfortable situations where they had to find new ways to function in a wholly unknown environment (Bartsch et al., 2020). Indeed, Lagowska et al. (2020) explained that many leaders have already or will fail in navigating the storm created by
this crisis because they were not able to adapt and take advantage of opportunities presented during this period. However, there are certain styles of leadership and competencies that make some organizational leaders more adept at handling crisis situations (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Kuswardhani, 2020; Turgeon, 2019). As Dirani et al. (2020) explained, the crisis created by the pandemic will change how organizations operate and the key players in this change will be the institutions’ leaders.

Fernandez and Shaw (2020) explained that organizations that utilized shared leadership were found to be more flexible in their responses to mass quarantine orders and the shift to a virtual environment. This confirms the findings of Kuswardhani (2020) that suggested distributed leadership helped educational institutions overcome many of the challenges presented by the pandemic. Northouse (2019) described distributed leadership as a situation where leadership is shared among those best suited to respond to particular scenarios. An example of distributed leadership in an academic setting, during the pandemic, could be a team that includes university leaders and health professionals. By including those from a variety of disciplines beyond the traditional university leadership, institutions are able to “improve the quality of decisions made since multiple perspectives can be obtained” (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). As such, distributed leadership may prove more effective than other leadership options, such as the traditional top-down approach which would require administrators to understand complex, rapidly changing situations with little support in the decision-making process.

In addition to distributed leadership, there are also specific approaches to individual leadership that administrators may find to be more effective during periods of crisis (Harb et al., 2020; Izzah et al., 2020; Sharafizad et al., 2019). Transformational leadership, described by Harb et al. (2020) as “inspirational motivation,” is strengthening employees’ commitment and
engagement. This allows organizations to be more flexible and responsive to changes in their environments, which is especially important in crisis situations where the key to crisis survival is rooted in adaptability (Bundy et al., 2017; Izzah et al., 2020). Further, because the transformational leadership approach focuses on the building of genuine relationships between leaders and followers, this method encourages affective commitment, characterized by employees’ emotional attachment to their leaders (Krajcsák, 2018; Northouse, 2019).

Similar to transformational leadership, servant leadership is also suggested as a highly effective approach to leading through a crisis (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Servant leadership is an approach to leadership first discussed by Robert Greenleaf, which is characterized by the idea that a leader seeks first to serve those who follow (Northouse, 2019). Because of this, servant leadership seeks to uplift and empower followers to take on greater challenges, encouraging relationship development between leaders and followers (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Servant leaders require high levels of emotional intelligence, as leaders must be able to recognize and understand their feelings and those of their followers in order to make decisions in line with this leadership approach (Abdullahi et al., 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). However, the leader that adopts this form of leadership will find that the investment in relationship building will increase the motivation of employees and develop higher levels of employee engagement, both of which are necessary characteristics of an organization that seeks to outlast a crisis (Krajcsák, 2018; Turgeon, 2019).

**Organizational Culture.** Daft (2016) defined organizational culture as “the set of values, norms, guiding beliefs, and understandings that is shared by members of an organization and taught to new members as the correct way to think, feel and behave” (p. 385). The culture within organizations has been of great interest to scholars since the 1980s and may have come from
investigations into the culture of successful Japanese corporations (Rowlinson & Procter, 1999). From this was born a desire to understand if there were specific characteristics that influence the success of businesses in the United States, resulting in a boom of organizational culture studies during the final decades of the 20th century (Alvesson, 2011).

There are two primary components of organizational culture: the observable culture and the unobservable culture (Neck et al., 2020). The observable culture consists of those things which are visible, even to outsiders. Examples of observable culture include dress codes and behavior, such as employees who never say, “you’re welcome” but instead respond with “my pleasure.” Unobservable culture consists of things that cannot be seen with the naked eye. This aspect of culture may be found in the values of the organization and is reflected in tasks such as decision-making and empowerment of employees.

Spicer (2020) reasoned that organizations have faced changes in their culture as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He explained that these changes in culture are a result of “jolts” in the external world where organizations operate. These jolts have the potential to cause organizations to act defensively, overreact, act hypocritically, or react radically. The unwanted outcome of such jolts and their responses is that change processes are damaged. This damage to the change process may result in employees who are unable to accept and support the change process and impede continued productivity for the organization during periods of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought some of the unobservable aspects of organizational culture into greater focus, specifically in relation to work-from-home policies and sick policies (when workers should come to work versus remaining at home while sick). Rudolph et al. (2021) argued that organizational culture can negatively impact efforts to keep workers home as the culture is driven by face-to-face interactions and the mere presence of the
employee is seen as an indication of performance. As such, some organizational cultures still encourage workers to continue work, even while sick; this not only reduces employee morale and commitment but also increases the risk of cross-infection between workers (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020).

**Job Design.** The earliest approaches to job design were developed in response to the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain in the late 18th century and into the early 19th century (Parker & Wall, 1998). Job design gained even greater definition under economist Adam Smith who developed the concept of “division of labor,” creating a series of simpler tasks to produce a more complex product. This model led to greater specialization within the job design of workers. Job design was further developed as a result of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management*, which attempted to determine the best way to complete an assigned task (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). Taylor believed that this approach to job design, where employees were assigned specific tasks based on their skills and abilities, could increase productivity substantially. While the approaches to job design have changed since Taylor and Smith first introduced job design, the desired outcome is the same: for employees to be as productive as possible while completing their given tasks.

Job design is the process by which workers complete their work (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). Vance (2006) explained that job design is a key factor in employee engagement. It encourages job autonomy and, as a result, increases employee commitment. Further, the autonomy created in job design and the ability of workers to lead themselves strengthens work engagement and increases productivity (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Galanti et al., 2021). However, as Lagowska et al. (2020) explained, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ways that people complete their work has had to change and remain flexible, which has caused stress in the
workplace and among employees and increased the challenges of organizational leaders. In response to challenges that have arisen from employees working in a virtual environment, leaders must also ensure that workers have all the technological, emotional, and developmental resources necessary for successful task completion (Panteli et al., 2019).

**Employee Commitment.** According to Spector (2013), “Employee commitment exists when employees sense a strong overlap between individual goals and the shared goals of the organization” (p. 87). It is typically broken down into three categories: affective, normative, and continuance commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Affective commitment is related to the employee’s emotional attachment to the organization or leaders. Alternatively, normative commitment is an obligatory relationship between the employee and their organization. They stay with their employer because they feel a debt toward them. Finally, continuance commitment is characterized by employees who are committed to the organization only until something better comes along. While there are multiple views to describe how an employee is committed to their organization, one thing is certain: an employee’s commitment is directly related to their performance on the job (Krajcsák, 2018). This is because the commitment of workers impacts deviant behavior such as absenteeism, thereby impacting productivity. As such, employee commitment is essential to the success of an organization (Aujla & Mclarney, 2020).
Table 1

Types of Employee Commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Commitment</th>
<th>Basis</th>
<th>Positive vs. Negative Aspects</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>An emotional connection between the employee and their leadership or organization.</td>
<td>Employees with affective commitment show greater support for change because they see the benefits of the change. Workers also show greater overall well-being and commitment to the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>An obligatory relationship between the worker and the organization.</td>
<td>Workers show higher levels of commitment due to their feelings of obligation to the organization. They support change efforts simply because they support the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuance</td>
<td>A relationship between the worker and their organization where they will only stay with the organization until they find a better option.</td>
<td>This aspect of commitment is not shown to be directly related to an employee’s willingness to support change. Employees are only committed to their organizations until the potential costs outweigh the benefits of their employment. These workers are very task-oriented and work toward reaching the goals of their organizations.</td>
</tr>
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Note. Sources for this table: Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Krajcsák, 2018; Shin et al., 2015.

Employee Engagement. Robbins and Coulter (2018) explained that employee engagement is a composite of the connection and satisfaction that an employee has with their job and leads to an increase in productivity. Therefore, employee engagement is a combination of employee commitment and job satisfaction. Shantz et al. (2013) explained that employee engagement is typically composed of three characteristics: vigor, dedication, and absorption. The energy and flexibility with which employees approach their work determine the level of vigor an employee possesses while dedication is signified by the involvement of the employee. Ojo et al.
(2021) posited that “engaged employees possess a sense of energetic and affective link to their occupational task” (p. 3). This would indicate that employee’s absorption and vigor can be seen through the depth to which they are immersed in their work tasks.

Engagement has many benefits to an organization. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the increase in general productivity (Robbins & Coulter, 2018; Sharafizad et al., 2019). However, employee engagement also contributes to those tasks that employees take on outside their prescribed roles (Shantz et al., 2013). Sharafizad et al. (2019) explained this by noting that engaged workers are more likely to exhibit discretionary effort, which is signified by their willingness to go beyond the expectations of their job descriptions. Another characteristic of the engaged employee is organizational citizenship behavior, which is sometimes attributed to employee discretionary effort (Sharafizad et al., 2019). Organizational citizenship behavior is characterized by employees who take on tasks voluntarily without the expectation that they will be rewarded by their organizations or leaders (Hamsani et al., 2019). Employees who exhibit organizational citizenship behavior are highly desirable to an organization because of the impact that they have on group and institutional productivity.

While employee engagement is very beneficial to organizations, it is important for leaders to recognize when the behaviors associated with high levels of engagement may, in fact, have the opposite effect. Employees will often become disengaged and less effective when they are unable to properly focus their efforts, as is the case when they attempt to do too many things at a single time (Wigham, 2018). As such, systems that are supportive of learning will increase employee engagement, leading to greater productivity. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees must balance the needs of their employers while also facing the increased demands from their family and working from home (Rudolph et al., 2021).
Related Studies

Gustafson and Haque (2020) sought to better understand the challenges faced by principals of virtual K-12 schools. The authors explained that primary education is swiftly growing and there are challenges specific to this environment, including policy implications, staff development, and the social and emotional development of a young population of students. Gustafson and Haque’s study was conducted using a qualitative design to gather a more in depth understanding of the perceptions of virtual school principals and because the authors sought to answer those open-ended types of questions that are best addressed by qualitative research. Interviews were the primary source of data used in this study. These interviews were conducted with school principals at several schools in California, with the primary requirement that the school offer a full-time virtual enrollment option to students.

The findings of the study indicated that virtual school principals need leadership training opportunities that help them develop the specialized skills needed to deal with these more specific challenges (Gustafson & Haque, 2020). Additionally, the authors pointed to five specific areas where virtual school principals faced significant challenges. These included (a) time, (b) parent involvement, (c) professional development, (d) social–emotional well-being, (e) policy. These were not specific to the needs of the principals but rather challenges they faced. For example, in the area of professional development, they sought professional development that was targeted toward their online instructors. Also, social–emotional well-being was a concern for increasing support in this area for virtually taught students. Although this study examined leaders of schools in a virtual environment, a major difference between the current study and this one was the focus on both the consumer (students) and the employee (virtual school faculty only).
Agarwal (2021) investigated the well-being of hospitality employees during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine what human resource management practices were the most effective at aiding the employees in working through the challenging period. The author investigated several aspects of human resource management including training and development, compensation, and leadership approaches. To complete this study Agarwal used a qualitative approach that incorporated semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected from 50 of the largest hotels in India, with nine hotels agreeing to participate in the study. Overall, just over 40 workers in various areas, from management to housekeeping, were included in these interviews.

Agarwal (2021) pointed out that hospitality employees were hit especially hard by this crisis because it restricted travel and recreational activities. These restrictions resulted in employees who faced significant feelings of job insecurity. As such, these facilities had employees who had high levels of fear and anxiety about their futures. Agarwal found, however, that hotels that conducted training were able to reduce the anxiety of many employees. Further, the value of authentic leadership in decreasing employee fear and anxiety was discovered, indicating that leadership style can have an impact on employee perception of the situation. A key finding from this study was that employees who worked from home were able to maintain high levels of productivity while also showing that they did not need high levels of supervision to maintain productivity.

M. T. Miller (2021) discussed the response of higher education institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, he sought to discover if these institutions of learning were able to learn from their experiences during this crisis. This study used an exploratory, descriptive approach and surveyed 300 university faculty leaders across the United States. To conduct this survey, the author used a 28-question survey with 20 Likert questions that addressed institutional
learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey was created in conjunction with a larger research project attempting to address shared governance during this same period. For the study conducted by M. T. Miller, the survey was sent electronically to faculty who held leadership positions at comprehensive and doctoral level universities in the United States.

According to M. T. Miller (2021), at the onset of the crisis, institutional leaders responded quickly but not necessarily in a flexible way. While they were able to transition to online learning and virtual workspaces, they did not take advantage of distributed leadership as quickly. Essentially, these institutions did not attempt to evolve their culture to support this change, but simply tried to get their existing cultures and functions to work remotely. An important distinction was made in this study, however, that greatly influenced the present study. This distinction is that higher education institutions operate in a dual atmosphere where they are both an institution of learning and also a business, where neither operation can suffer to further the success of the other.

Table 2

Summary of Related Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Study Title and Summary of Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gustafson and Haque</td>
<td>“Uncovering the Challenges and Leadership Practices of Virtual School Principals”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership programs for K–12 administrators are needed to address the challenges presented by the new environment where these leaders now operate. Further, the authors pressed the need for increased research in the area of virtual education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agarwal</td>
<td>“Shattered but Smiling: Human Resource Management and the Wellbeing of Hotel Employees During COVID-19”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizations were benefitted by their ability to perform through flexibility in practices. The author also found that organizational practices that included authentic leadership, development of relationships, and training or coaching strengthened the bond between workers and the organization and reduced employee stress. This study also showed that workers who worked in virtual</td>
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</table>
environments during the COVID-19 pandemic did not require high levels of oversight to perform well.


A key point made in this study is that higher education institutions faced many of the same challenges that other businesses were forced to confront as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author also noted that, while these institutions showed great flexibility and speed in their transition to online learning, they did not apply those same practices in other areas of the school.

**Anticipated and Discovered Themes**

As the literature suggests, a key aspect of maintaining productivity rests in an organization’s ability to engage and motivate workers in virtual environments (Krajcsák, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2021; Shantz et al., 2013). Additionally, organizations are encouraged to ensure that their workers have resources available to employees so that they can manage their duties while working in virtual environments (Panteli et al., 2019). This could be as simple as technological support or as complex as allowing increased flexibility to balance home and work responsibilities (Bartsch et al., 2020; Panteli et al., 2019). Supportive measures such as these have the ability to increase the commitment of employees (Krajcsák, 2018; Panteli et al., 2019).

There will be specific types of leadership that successfully guide organizations through the period of crisis (Bartsch et al., 2020; Lagowska et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021; Sharafizad et al., 2019). During a crisis, workers look to their leaders not only for guidance and support but also for context for the situation (Bundy et al., 2017). Because of this, leadership during such a dynamic period needs to consider the situation and provide options for the organization and its people with the information available. At the same time, however, the literature indicates that those leaders who are more employee- and relationship-focused, as is seen in servant leaders and transformational leaders, may create greater engagement and productivity within their workforce (Rudolph et al., 2021). Indeed, as Bartsch et al. (2020) explained, “regardless of how severely a
crisis disrupts a firm, ultimately, appropriate leadership behaviors are decisive in maintaining employees’ work performance and steering them through uncertain times” (p. 81).

Organizational resilience and flexibility are keys to reacting to and thriving in the midst of the challenges created by crisis situations (Reeves et al., 2020). Duchek (2020) pointed out that it is through an organization's resilience that workers are supported through the uncertainty and can face the stress that comes from experiences like those during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, flexibility will help to increase worker well-being because it allows employees to address the needs in their households while maintaining work engagement and task productivity.

While the field study confirmed the anticipate themes, it also brought to light additional themes that I did not expect initially. These themes included (a) the impact of supportive leadership, (b) effective communication, (c) the impact of planning, (d) change management on employee perception of the crisis, and finally, (e) the concept that employees want to be heard. Bartsch et al. (2020) pointed to appropriate leadership as a key factor in organizational success during periods of crisis when employees face greater uncertainty and look to their supervisors for guidance. This idea ties into the vital role that organizational leaders play in sensemaking for their employees while leading them through change, where employees are more likely to accept and embrace changes when they are led by supportive managers (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). Considering these concepts in tandem, employee perceptions of crisis periods would be influenced by having supportive leaders and their approach to change management. As Fugate and Soenen (2018) explained, the supportive leader typically uses effective communication models, thereby ensuring that workers are aware of the changes taking place and are more likely to adapt to the uncertainty presented. The authors also pointed to the value of participative leadership approaches that include employees in the process of addressing changes to be
implemented. This approach reinforces the importance of employee feedback. Aujla and Mclarney (2020) also pointed to the value of involving employees in the decision-making processes during periods of change, noting that giving employees a voice increases their commitment to the organization and the change process. Separately, the value of each of these is beneficial to creating engagement among the workforce, but during periods of crisis they appear to have even greater value.

**Summary of the Literature Review**

The literature presents many aspects of the challenges faced by leaders of private higher education institutions in the southeast United States as well as background information regarding the many facets that influence employee behavior. Several sources noted the importance of organizational leaders in guiding, inspiring, and clarifying the practices of workers (Bartsch et al., 2020; Lagowska et al., 2020; Sharafizad et al., 2019). These behaviors become especially important during times of crisis when specific leadership characteristics and approaches are found to be more effective for those workers facing uncertainty (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Kuswardhani, 2020; Turgeon, 2019). It is from these leaders that employees draw motivation and where culture can be established that will either strengthen the organization or lead it to failure (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021). In addition to the characteristics of leaders, there are also factors within the organization that can impact the productivity of private college and university employees who must transition to virtual environments in periods of crisis. Presently, there are two studies that are similar in nature to this study. Gustafson and Haque (2020) have examined these challenges from the perspective of K–12 institutions while Agarwal (2021) sought a greater understanding of the impact of the pandemic on hospitality employees. Additionally, M. T. Miller (2021) investigated the flexibility and ability of higher
education institutions to learn from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. From this information, a greater understanding of the motivation and behavior of employees can be applied to leadership competencies that best support employees who transition to virtual environments in response to a crisis.

**Summary of Section 1 and Transition**

Section 1 provided the reader with a basis for the research study, covering the background and purpose of the study. The problem to be addressed, the potential challenges faced by organizational leaders within private higher educational institutions in the southeastern United States during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, was also established in Section 1. Further, it was explained that this qualitative study sought to increase the body of knowledge surrounding leadership practices, organizational behavior, and employee engagement. Research questions that were created to help guide the research were developed and presented in this section as well. Additionally, the benefit of using a qualitative, multiple case study approach to research was presented to address this research problem. Section 1 also provided readers with definitions of key terms for easier understanding of the research, as well as potential limitations, delimitations, and assumptions surrounding the study topic. Finally, this section concluded with a review of the academic literature surrounding the topic and its related concepts, theories, and constructs.

Section 2 will cover specific information involved in the research study, including the role that I as the researcher played in the study. Additionally, this section will explore the appropriateness of the flexible, qualitative, multiple case study approach to answering the research questions. Ways in which validity can be ensured in such an approach will also be included in this section. Further, Section 2 will discuss the population for this research, how the
selected population qualifies for inclusion and the role of sampling in the study. Finally, this section will discuss how data were collected and analyzed based on the selected methodology.

Section 2: The Project

In this qualitative multiple case study, the researcher sought to understand the challenges of leaders in higher education organizations in the southeast United States when workers were forced to rapidly transition to virtual work environments in response to crisis situations. This study attempted to determine potential approaches that would allow these organizations to sustain their performance through their engagement of their workforce. Research questions which sought to describe the challenges that leaders faced, the differences between a virtual and traditional work environment, and the impact of that virtual environment on workers’ productivity formed the backbone for this study. This section provides a better understanding of the role that the researcher played in this study and provides the basis for the use of a qualitative multiple case study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the challenges faced by organizational leaders during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, often resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement. Further, this study explored methods available to leaders to increase engagement and productivity for employees during a crisis.

Role of the Researcher

To understand the role that I as the researcher played in the study, it is important to first understand the approach to the research design. Even in this, though, I played an important part, because my worldview, or paradigm, led me toward a particular framework (Farrelly, 2012). For
example, in quantitative research, the researcher will look to a scientific method to understand and test a phenomenon while the researcher remains independent of the test and its results. Alternatively, in qualitative research, the researcher is incorporated into the situation that is being studied and recognizes that it is a setting from which he or she cannot be fully removed (Fusch et al., 2018). In this qualitative research design, I was seen as a primary instrument of the research that was conducted because many aspects of qualitative research required the interpretation and evaluation of descriptions provided by the study participants (Yin, 2016).

In addressing the research questions presented in this study, I undertook several tasks. To better understand the challenges facing leaders of small, private higher education organizations in the southeastern United States, I relied on survey data, personal interviews, documentation, direct observations, and archival records (Yin, 2018). Through the collection of several types of data, a greater understanding of these challenges felt by organizational leaders was gained in the context of the environment in which they took place. The added benefit of including multiple data sources is that it also allows for greater confidence in the results of the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Because qualitative research relies on the researcher to serve as the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation, there are often risks to the reliability of the research results (Yin, 2016). As Robson and McCartan (2016) explained, “There is typically a close relationship between the researcher and the setting, and between the researcher and respondents” (p. 171), which introduces the risk of bias in the study. Fusch et al. (2018) pointed out that qualitative research proves difficult for many researchers because they are unable to recognize their bias and the impact that it may have on their research. There are, however, options available to the researcher to curb issues such as bias.
Yin (2016) encouraged the researcher to recognize, early on, that qualitative research cannot be wholly separated from the subjective experience and lens of the researcher. Instead, they should work to set aside their preconceived notions of the world in which they are operating. This concept of bracketing is borrowed from phenomenology, which challenges the researcher to attempt to separate their expectations and views from what they will be observing, allowing them to have a more objective view of the research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Yin (2016) explained that although it is not possible for the researcher to fully remove all of their preconceptions, it is vital that they exert effort to do so to the greatest extent possible to gain the greatest insights from their fieldwork experience. Tufford and Newman (2012) explained that through bracketing, the researcher strives to “mitigate the potential disastrous effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby increase the rigor of the project” (p. 81). The authors suggested multiple methods of bracketing, including the use of theoretical and methodological memos, outside interviews (to bring the researcher’s potential preconceptions to the surface), and the use of reflexive journaling.

Proponents of reflexivity include Creswell and Creswell (2018), who encouraged the researcher to employ reflexivity to help them better understand potential biases they may bring to the research. This is achieved by recognizing and noting both the past experiences of the researcher and how that may influence the interpretation of the research. However, the researcher should not allow their reflexivity to become such a part of the study that it overpowers the primary themes of the research (Yin, 2016). To properly bracket in this research study, I used reflexive journaling as the process supported my efforts to maintain a reflexive position throughout the research project (Tufford & Newman, 2012). These journals included my assumptions regarding the data, my reasons for undertaking this specific topic, and insights
during the data collection process. In doing this, I recognized these preconceptions as opposed to repressing them and was able to gain greater depth within the research.

**Research Methodology**

Robson and McCartan (2016) contended that real world research “endeavours to understand the lived-in reality of people in society and its consequences” (p. 3). This was, in fact, a key component of this research study: to understand the reality and challenges faced by organizational leaders who have had to manage and engage workers operating in virtual environments due to crisis situations. There were many ways in which a researcher may choose to approach this problem. It was vital, then, that I determined early in the process the specific approach that would guide the research, thus avoiding unnecessary confusion and difficulty as the study progressed. This study used a flexible design, as it was meant to help me better understand the problem rather than examining a specific relationship between variables, as is found in the use of fixed design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this section, greater detail will be provided to explain the choice for this design as well as that of the method selected.

**Discussion of Flexible Design**

Research designs are often labeled as either fixed, flexible, or multi-strategy. Fixed designs have their process established early on in the study while flexible designs empower the researcher to adapt that process, allowing the research to guide the approach the researcher takes for the study (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Alternatively, a multi-strategy design includes components from both the fixed and flexible approaches. It is important to note that often the flexible design is referred to as a qualitative design, owing to the types of data that are typically collected using this method. However, it is not uncommon to see some quantitative data present in flexible designs.
This study was conducted utilizing a flexible design. The choice for this design was guided by two principles: the worldview of the researcher and the research problem. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that a researcher must understand her worldview, as it will influence the research design selected. Pragmatism is derived from the writing of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey and is very broadly described as a theory that seeks to use whatever method is most appropriate for answering the questions posed (Patton, 2015). More specifically, Patton (2015) explained that the pragmatist paradigm seeks to gain greater “practical understandings and wisdom about concrete, real-world issues” (p. 152). This study sought to gain a better understanding of the challenges that leaders of higher education institutions faced when employees transitioned to virtual environments; it examined those practical questions and attempted to determine answers to better inform future actions. As such, this study aligned with my pragmatic worldview.

Further, Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) suggested that the purpose of the research and the problem to be investigated will guide the approach taken by the researcher. Because I was guided by a pragmatic worldview, which is characterized by the idea of the practical implications of the research, I used whichever design was found to be most appropriate to address the problem (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This decision was seconded by Patton (2015), who argued that through the pragmatic approach, the researcher will look to the situation and make decisions with regard to approach instead of strict reliance on a particular design. As a result of this worldview, the focus fell heavily on the research problem, which ensured that the findings of the research would increase the understanding of the topic.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) encouraged the use of a flexible, qualitative design when seeking to gain a “deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the
perspective of the research participants” (p. 38). As Stake suggested, the nature of this design is focused on inquiry in an effort to better understand the problem where the researcher will play the role of both gatherer of data as well as instrument by which it is interpreted. Additionally, as the purpose of this study was to understand the challenges faced by leaders of higher education organizations whose employees were forced to transition to virtual work with little preparation, the focus was the meaning that the participants found regarding the problem rather than the researcher’s ascribed ideas. I used the information gathered to provide readers with a complete, well-rounded view of the problem, the environment in which it took place, and those people involved. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), these characteristics help to define the approach to this study as qualitative.

Discussion Case Study Method

This flexible, qualitative research study employed a multiple case study method to aid the researcher in better understanding the challenges faced by leaders of higher education organizations when their employees had to rapidly transition to virtual work environments. Merriam (2009) defined the case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). Further, according to Yin (2018), a case study allows the researcher to study a “case” in order to gain a better understanding of a problem within its context. This could mean that the researcher is examining a topic within a particular group or setting. A specific area of concern when using case study methodology is the bounded nature of this approach. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained this as the specific parameters by which the case study is defined. These parameters may include a specific event, group, or location. For this multiple case study, the research was bound by the time period of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the period where workers were operating within a virtual environment.
A multiple case study method was used to complete this research. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this method is used when multiple cases are included in the study to increase the likelihood of replication. The inclusion of more than one single case presents more “variation across the cases, [and] the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be” (Merriam, 2009, p. 49). Through the use of a multiple case study, I not only had the opportunity to examine the problem within the bounded environment of a single case, but I also had the ability to study the problem across several cases, where I looked for areas of comparison (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2014). In this research study, each case represented a private, non-profit higher education institution in the southeastern United States.

There were specific challenges to the multiple case study approach that had to be considered. While these studies may present results that are more easily generalized, they also generate a great deal more data for the researcher to manage, which can be overwhelming (Gustafsson, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, single case studies have been shown to be more beneficial when studying a single concept or group (Gustafsson, 2017). While I recognized the benefits of the single case study method and the challenges associated with multiple case studies, this was the method I believed to be most appropriate to address the purpose and problem presented in this study. The primary reason for selection of the multiple case study method was the opportunity for increased reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Yin (2018) explained, the use of multiple case studies offers the researcher the opportunity to apply the logic of replication to the study to strengthen the outcomes of the research.

Yin (2018) outlined several approaches for the collection of data for those researchers completing case study research, including documentation, interviews, archival records, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. In this study, I used documentation,
interviews, and archival records. Of these data sources, the primary source was interviews, which allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of the organizational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Additionally, documents were collected from participating institutions. These included written records from the institution, public posts or news from institutional websites, or information compiled to support the research. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) explained that these data sources serve as a robust supplement to interviews and can create a deeper understanding of the topic. Further, by using multiple modes of data collection, I was able to establish a convergence of the evidence, where the interviews of the case participants aligned with the documentation and archival records, leading to findings that were reliable and valid (Yin, 2018).

**Discussion of Triangulation in the Study**

One key tool used in qualitative research to ensure greater reliability of the data is triangulation. In its most basic form, triangulation uses multiple sources of data to increase the quality and reliability of the research (Fusch et al., 2018). There are four primary approaches to triangulation available for use by the researcher. These include data triangulation, observer triangulation, methodological triangulation, and theory triangulation (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In data triangulation, the researcher uses multiple forms of data collection to ensure that the results are not swayed in a particular direction. For example, the researcher may conduct interviews, review documents and other artifacts, and use observation to collect information used in the study. Alternatively, observer triangulation is the use of more than one observer while methodological triangulation results from the use of both qualitative and quantitative designs. Finally, theory triangulation is the use of several theories in the study.
This qualitative multiple case study used data triangulation as the method to ensure reliability and validity. Because the approach used in this study relied on interviews, observation, and document evaluation, the use of data triangulation fit into the design and complemented my work as the researcher. An important consideration when using the data triangulation approach is to include information that may contradict the expectations of the researcher. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explained, this allows “a realistic assessment of the phenomenon under study” (p. 261). Through the inclusion of information that may have contradicted my initial considerations, I was able to ensure the credibility of the research and show that personal biases did not impede the conclusions drawn (Yin, 2016).

**Summary of Research Methodology**

This study was conducted with a flexible design and used a multiple case study method. The design of this study was guided by my worldview. Further, it was directed by the research problem and purpose to understand the challenges faced by leaders in higher education organizations in their attempts to engage and manage employees during a rapid transition to virtual work environments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While the selected method presented challenges, the opportunity to increase the validity of the study through the benefit of replication offered by this method supported the need for the multiple case study method (Yin, 2018). To further ensure the reliability and validity while decreasing the impact of bias, I utilized data triangulation by including data from multiple sources (Fusch et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Specifically, the study included data from interviews, and documents and artifacts.
Participants

The participant selection for this study was guided by the specific problem statement. Based on this, participants included those who held leadership positions at private, higher education institutions in the southeastern United States. Private higher education institutions were comprised of those schools that are not for profit and grant degrees at the bachelor’s level and higher. Further, the region of the southeastern United States included Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (1974). As this study was conducted using the multiple case study approach, the participants were further reduced based on the bounding of the case study design. This multiple case study design used two schools located in Georgia which met the criteria presented. Therefore, the participants were limited to those people who held leadership positions at the institutions selected.

Population and Sampling

Once a decision has been made to establish the bounds of a case, the researcher must then determine how best to represent the population of the study through determining an appropriate sample (Farrugia, 2019). While a quantitative study uses sampling to ensure a greater statistical representation of the population studied, qualitative research focuses on the ability to understand and learn from the experiences of those being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Patton, 2015). This section explains the population determined by the research questions and problem and provides support for the chosen method for sampling.

Discussion of Population

The population for this multiple case study was determined by the bounded nature of the case study design and based on both the research questions to be answered and the specific
problem statement. Farrugia (2019) explained that these factors should drive the initial sample for the researcher. Further, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2015) the boundaries of a case study provide the frame in which the researcher conducts the research. In this study, the bounds indicated that the population should come from private, not for profit higher education institutions that grant a bachelor’s degree at minimum and are located in the southeastern United States. To determine the specific states to be included, information was used from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (1974), which indicated that the southeastern region includes Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida. In this region, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) database indicated that 265 institutions met the initial criteria for selection. As the study sought to provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by leaders of these organizations, the primary participants sought included the institution’s director of human resources, vice presidents, and provost. However, any employee of a higher education institution indicated was able participate if they served in a supervisory capacity where they were required to manage and engage workers. As such, participating institutions were consulted regarding other positions where employee management was required. The participant institutions provided information that allowed me to include other positions such as the director of undergraduate admissions, director of graduate admissions, director of financial aid, assistant vice president for recruitment, and the assistant vice president of finance, and the university controller.

**Discussion of Sampling**

This multiple case study utilized purposive sampling as opposed to random sampling. Purposive sampling is considered to be a non-probabilistic form of sampling because it is not used to generate statistical information for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Alternatively,
random sampling, which is often used in quantitative research, allows for statistical interpretation of the data generated and generalization of the study results (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). However, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) explained, generalization is not the primary concern with qualitative research. Instead, as with this study, I attempted to investigate information-rich subjects to gain understanding of the research topic (Patton, 2015). To that end, a purposive sample, where I selected specific participants based on the research questions and problem, was the most appropriate choice. Specifically, I used criterion sampling to ensure that the study participants met the parameters of this study. The use of this sampling method allowed the selection of participants based on predetermined criteria which were directed by the purpose of the study and were established to ensure the study was information-rich, a key attribute of the qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition to criterion sampling, this study also used convenience sampling, where some participants were selected based on their availability and the access that was granted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While this is not an ideal method, I turned to this method due to poor response rates from institutions contacted. Although some participants were included based on their ready availability, both the participants and their institution met the guidelines set out initially for selection based on criterion sampling.

Participants for this case study were based on the criteria set in accordance with the research questions and the specific problem statement. As such, participants had to be employed by private, not for profit higher education institutions that grant 4-year degrees and higher, located in one of the following states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida. Additionally, as the purpose of this study was to explore the potential challenges faced by organizational leaders of these institutions during a rapid
transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, it was important that the participants served in a supervisory capacity.

There was no hard number to guide me as to the appropriate number of cases to include in the study (Miles et al., 2020). For example, Patton (2015) suggested four to five cases to achieve data saturation. However, Yin (2018) noted that even two cases increase the strength of the case study design. The primary purpose of the qualitative research was to create an information-rich study, from which others may gain insights and understanding of the topic. Therefore, efforts to include vast amounts of data may not have allowed me to gain the depth needed for an information-rich study (Miles et al., 2020). Indeed, as Patton (2015) explained, small samples may provide the researcher with greater depth of information. Instead, I sought to reach data saturation, at which point no new information was gained by interviewing additional participants.

Considering this guidance, the priority of this research study was to achieve data saturation through the collection of survey data, interviews, and documents from two schools who met the criteria for this study. To collect this data, the researcher identified potential schools by using the IPEDS database, which previously indicated 265 potential institutions. From that information, an introductory email was sent to potential sites requesting their participation in this study. Based on the responses to this email, I selected two sites at which to begin the research. I then contacted those sites via email, requesting the contact information for participants. It was my intention to speak with a minimum of five supervisory employees at each institution, including additional participants from the institution, if necessary, to achieve data saturation. Upon receiving contact information for participants, I then sent an introductory email and informed consent form, which would be returned prior to the interview to be scheduled. One
institution provided the contact information for 15 supervisory employees while the other
provided information for eight. The researcher was able to conduct interviews with eight and
four participants, respectively. Interviews were conducted virtually and recorded to allow the
researcher to create verbatim transcripts.

**Summary of Population and Sampling**

This multiple case study was conducted using two higher education institutions located in
the southeastern United States as indicated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget.
Purposeful sampling was used in this study, as my primary goal was to gain deeper
understanding of the topic rather than to establish generalizability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I
contacted several institutions seeking participation in the study and selected two from the
responses. From this information, I then reached out to employees who served in a leadership
capacity, as indicated by the institution, and also scheduled a time for a virtual interview. To
achieve data saturation, I interviewed a minimum of 50% of participants provided by each
institution. Data saturation was recognized when responses became less varied among
participants and new themes were no longer emerging.

**Data Collection & Organization**

To complete this qualitative multiple case study, I needed to collect a significant amount
of data. With the collected data, I was able to determine particular themes with regard to the
experiences of leaders in higher education organizations who attempted to manage and engage
employees during the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section provides insights into the
information collected as well as how it was managed and its confidentiality protected.
Data Collection Plan

The determination of the data to be collected lies in the hands of the researcher. As Merriam (2009) explained, information does not become data until the point that the researcher determines that it plays a role in the research and acknowledges its value as data. Robson and McCartan (2016) further noted that the methods utilized by the researcher are directed by the information needed to properly address the research questions. This research study made use of interviews, documents, and archived data to gain a greater understanding of the challenges faced by leaders at higher education institutions while they attempted to manage and engage employees who had shifted to virtual work environments due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After participants had been selected to conduct interviews, I sent consent forms (Appendix A) which were completed prior to scheduling the interview. These interviews were conducted and recorded through a virtual meeting technology tool (which was previously approved through the consent form). When sending out the consent form, I also provided information concerning the interview, including an overview of the topic and my plan to protect the participants’ personal information.

To ensure that interviews were transcribed appropriately, I employed member-checking. Such evaluation by the interview participants ensures the veracity of their accounts as recorded by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking was completed by allowing interview participants to review a copy of their transcribed interviews, ensuring that the information was correct (Stake, 2010). Additionally, this provided me with the opportunity to conduct follow up interviews with participants, sharing my initial interpretations or conclusions and allowing the participant to verify their validity within the context of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such follow up interviews also allowed
me to ask for greater detail or clarify any areas of confusion from the previous interview (Stake, 2010).

**Instruments**

It is important to first recognize that, in a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument because the researcher is responsible for interpreting and analyzing the documents, interviews, and all other sources of data used in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The primary tool I utilized for data collection in this multiple case study was interviews. Yin (2018) noted that interviews provide researchers seeking to perform case study research with a wealth of data from which to draw. Indeed, as Merriam (2009) explained, the researcher is able to use interviews in place of observations to discover what is on the minds of participants. Further, through interviews, the researcher gains insights about the participants, their environment, and the ways that they viewed their environment.

More specifically, this multiple case study used semi-structured interviews, as they are highly effective in generating rich data for case study research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Using the semi-structured interview process, I engaged participants with questions that were more open-ended, which allowed the participants to provide descriptive data (Merriam, 2009). As these were semi-structured interviews, I made use of an interview guide (see Appendix B) which provided a general idea of the questions that I had determined would aid in addressing the research questions (Seidman, 2013). Hancock and Algozzine (2011) explained that this guide provides a general framework with questions worded in a way that allows for flexibility in the interview. It also allows for follow-up questions that help the researcher gain more specific insights into the experiences of the participants.
In addition to interviews, I utilized documents and archived data in this multiple case study. These are important sources for data in case study research, as they are “not dependent on the whims of human beings whose cooperation is essential for collecting good data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139). Documents and archived data provided me with descriptive information to enhance the information gathered from interviews and aided in verifying the information provided by participants during the interview process. Documents collected in this research study included information provided from reports to the IPEDS and reports generated by the participating schools as well as press releases and news reports that were posted on the websites of participating schools. As Hancock and Algozzine (2011) indicated, these resources support and enhance the information collected during the interview process.

**Data Organization Plan**

Merriam (2009) explained that, without a proper organizational structure for the data, it is difficult for the researcher to analyze and interpret the data. As such, the use of a case study database is encouraged, allowing the researcher to access the data more quickly during the process of analysis. I kept all data for this research study in a password-protected folder and logged in a password-protected database. Following the advice of Creswell and Poth (2018), to protect the confidentiality of the research participants, the master list and all data were kept separate. Data were stored in multiple formats for this multiple case study. These primarily included Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Word, and .MP4 video files. Emails were collected using Microsoft Outlook Exchange Server and Google Enterprise Gmail, both of which ensure the security of their resources. I used MAXDQA for data analysis and loaded all files into this system, ensuring that the library was stored in a password-protected file and that a password was
required to access the software. Hard copies of documents or artifacts were stored in a fire-proof, locking safe.

Interviews were recorded using Zoom and stored in a .MP4 format. These files were transcribed using Scribie transcription software. The audio file and transcript were then loaded into MAXQDA for analysis and coding. It was vital that interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure that it was the experience of the participant and not my interpretation that was analyzed (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, I compiled field notes during interviews, made notes of potential themes, ideas that were generated from the participant’s responses and non-verbal communications, and any reflexive thoughts that needed to be acknowledged for bracketing. These field notes were transcribed and added to the password-protected file system and MAXQDA to allow for easy analysis.

Summary of Data Collection & Organization

Because this was a qualitative study, I was the primary instrument as I was not only responsible for determining what was recognized as data, but I also conducted the analysis and interpretation of all data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009). This qualitative multiple case study utilized interviews, documents, and archived data to address the research questions. These sources of data provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges leaders of higher education organizations faced when working to manage and engage workers who had shifted to virtual work environments. All data collected were housed in a database and research matrix which was stored in password protected folders on my computer.

Data Analysis

After I collected and organized the data utilizing a digital filing system and a case study database that allowed me to quickly refer to specific pieces of data, the task of analysis began.
Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) suggested a four-step process of data analysis that includes (a) reviewing data, (b) coding data, (c) reporting findings, and (d) interpreting the findings. This section provides an understanding of the approach that I took to complete the data analysis process.

**Emergent Ideas**

I needed a deep understanding of the data in order to recognize emergent ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To attain this level of understanding, it was important for me to spend a significant period of time in the data, reading and understanding it holistically before attempting to reduce it through the coding process. Through reviewing the data, I was able to see the areas of convergence of the data where I could gain a deeper understanding of how the data related to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). During this period of data review, I created verbatim transcripts of interviews, ensuring accuracy, and read through transcripts, documents, and archived data several times while making notes in either a field journal or in the margins of the transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Throughout this process, I looked for patterns throughout the data that I believed would lead to greater understanding of my topic (Yin, 2018).

It was during this period that I needed to determine the model I intended to use to think about the data. Whether I used inductive or deductive analysis would impact how I used the data in the case study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Inductive analysis focuses on the idea that the data can explain the concept and that themes emerge through greater understanding of the data while deductive analysis attempts to support an existing theory through the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) encouraged the inductive
approach, as it encourages the researcher to approach the process without bias, seeking to gain insight from the ideas that emerge from the data.

To assist in the analysis process, I used the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software suite. I made notes while reading and re-reading the data stored in this software, while I also took notes and wrote memos concerning themes as they emerged through the in-depth evaluation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This software did not do all the work for me but instead assisted in making themes and patterns more apparent (Yin, 2018). So that MAXQDA could be used to its fullest potential, I loaded all interviews, transcripts, documents, and archived data into the software, which allowed for quick retrieval and complete analysis.

**Coding Themes**

Merriam (2009) simplified the coding process, describing it as the “assigning of some sort of short hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p. 173). During this phase of analysis, I assigned specific words or phrases to portions of the data which aligned to the various themes that I saw emerging. Coding was one of the primary aspects of qualitative data analysis and was needed to assist in creating order out of the chaos of many pieces of data. In this multiple case study, I utilized MAXQDA to assign codes to the data as I read through each artifact. This allowed me to separate the data into smaller categories to more easily visualize the emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To allow for easy retrieval of the coded data, I used short phrases and single words rather than lengthy phrases, numbers, or colors, which were also options for coding as indicated by Merriam (2009).
Interpretations

The Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) model suggested that interpretations happen in Step 4 of the data analysis process, at the end of all other data analysis when the sensemaking occurs after the findings of the research. However, Seidman (2013) argued that interpretation takes place throughout the qualitative research process, where the researcher is continuously influenced and directed by the data. This concept of interpretation would suggest that the researcher begins interpreting even before the data collection process. It is possible, however, that these two ideas of interpretation are not mutually exclusive. The researcher may begin interpreting data leading to emerging ideas and themes which direct further research, but can wait to interpret the findings of the research study until the end of the data analysis process as described by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016). It is through this process that the researcher is able to begin to understand the answers to the research questions and to move further into where those answers may lead.

To reach this point, I moved through the data analysis process fully, made notes and recognized the emergence of parallels through the experiences of the participants, documents, and archived data. I then compared the themes generated from the analysis of the data with the existing literature. Through the comparison of previous research and the information gleaned from the fieldwork and data analysis of this study, I could determine if that research supported the findings of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Alternatively, it was possible that the research findings would contradict the existing literature, which was also of value, as it was possible that such a finding would indicate a possible divergence in the research and the study.
Data Representation

The primary way that I analyzed data was by evaluating its visual representation, which Miles et al. (2020) explained can be completed through either traditional or progressive means. Data representation in qualitative research is traditionally presented in a report, the structure of which is guided by the research questions and the study itself. Miles et al. (2020) provided basic guidelines for a traditional report in which the presentation of findings indicates the background of how the study came about, the context of the study, and the methodology and paradigm driving the research; data are presented in a way that allows readers to easily draw conclusions and attempt to explain the larger meaning of the conclusions. A final guideline is that the report should not be boring. Progressive data presentation comes in formats other than the traditional report, which could include documentary films or a photography or art exhibit.

As this research study had a traditional purpose, its data representation followed a traditional format. Data presented in the report used text and tables to allow readers to understand the themes generated during data analysis. In addition to these traditional methods of data representation, I used an emerging tool, the word cloud. A word cloud provides viewers with a visual representation of the frequency of particular words (Bazeley, 2021). I easily created this visual using MAXQDA. After the data were coded, I used word clouds in conjunction with frequency tables and code maps to determine how often phrases appeared in the data.

Analysis for Triangulation

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) described triangulation as the use of several different approaches to examine the same concept or problem. Further, the authors explained that, initially, this tool was used to increase the rigor of qualitative research, as this approach was considered inferior by some. Triangulation is the process of analyzing the research problem
using multiple approaches with the intent of strengthening the trust in the results of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). There are four primary approaches to triangulation in qualitative research: (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. Data triangulation is achieved when the researcher utilizes multiple sources of data while investigator triangulation relies on the use of multiple researchers to conduct interviews or observations during the study. Theory triangulation uses multiple theories to approach the data. Finally, methodological triangulation occurs when the researcher uses several methods to research the phenomenon, comparing the results of the outcome of each, often leading to a mixed-methods approach to the research.

Yin (2018) argued that the case study approach to qualitative research lends itself well to the use of data triangulation as it presents the researcher with several sources for data collection. As such, the researcher made use of data triangulation in this qualitative multiple case study. Specifically, I utilized interviews, documents, and archived data to address the research questions. These data sources were not used to generate themes specific to the individual data source, but rather the data sources worked together collectively to direct me to those themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach to triangulation allowed me to compare the different data collected, which helped to indicate themes while it also increased the validity of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Further, as Stake (2010) explained, through triangulating data where interviews were supported by documentary and archival data, I was able to ensure that my data were legitimate.

**Summary of Data Analysis**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) suggested a four-step process for qualitative data analysis, which I used to review the data and discover emergent ideas. Digging deeper, I utilized the
MAXQDA software to code sections of the data, which allowed for quicker access and more easily recognized parallels between the different data sources. I acknowledged that some aspects of interpretation may have taken place throughout the research study. However, interpretation of the data analysis took place after I had spent a significant period of time in the data gaining a greater understanding of the concepts that emerged (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Themes discovered through the research study were then compared to the existing literature so that I could determine if it supported or contradicted the literature. The study was presented in a traditional format utilizing text, tables, and imagery to create a report that allows the reader to better understand the themes discovered (Miles et al., 2020). Finally, I made use of data triangulation where I collected multiple forms of data centered around the phenomenon and ensured that the evidence was strong and gave the study validity and rigor (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

**Reliability and Validity**

One of the primary reasons that researchers employ triangulation in a qualitative research project is to increase the internal validity of the study (Merriam, 2009). Through reliability and validity, the researcher can ensure that others are able to determine the credibility of the study as well as how the study results mirror reality. Using triangulation in conjunction with other measures to strengthen reliability and validity, the researcher lends integrity to their study. In this section, the methods used to ensure reliability and validity are explained.

**Reliability**

Merriam (2009) explained that, in qualitative research, replication is difficult because the researcher is attempting to understand the human experience rather than complete experiments in a scientific setting. Because of this, the primary goal of reliability in a qualitative study is to
create a study where those reading will “concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense—they are consistent and dependable” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). In addition to employing triangulation in the study, I increased the reliability of the study through several measures, including the design of the study and how the results are presented.

Along with reliability, it was important for me to show that my study was trustworthy. This concept is similar to the quantitative aspect of rigor (Miles et al., 2020). Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that trustworthiness serves in place of the statistical measures used by quantitative researchers. To ensure trustworthiness in a qualitative study, Miles et al. (2020) encouraged the researcher to use triangulation, noting that multiple data sources add to the credibility of the researcher’s claims. Additionally, Miles et al. explained that spending a great deal of time in the field building relationships with participants can lead to greater trustworthiness as it encourages those participants to be more open about their experiences. Finally, internal attention to bias on the part of the researcher can increase the trustworthiness of the study, with Miles et al. suggesting that researchers ask themselves specific questions to recognize potential biases in their writing. To do this, I employed a reflexive journal that allowed me to take note of thoughts and ideas that may have been influenced by biases that I held regarding the research (Yin, 2016).

This study used an audit trail, memoing, reflexive journaling, and rich descriptions in its construction and reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Ensuring that others who read the study may be able to transfer the results and make use of the findings requires rich descriptions, as it allows readers to become more involved in the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009). To do this, I provided a detailed account of how I collected the data for the
study, noting how decisions were made regarding the inclusion of data, coding, and the manner in which the findings were presented.

**Validity**

In addition to ensuring that readers have rich, thick descriptions, it was important that both those descriptions and the findings mirrored the world in which the study took place (Merriam, 2009). While triangulation is one of the strongest ways that a researcher can increase validity, I also employed member-checking, data saturation, and reflexivity to ensure that my findings were consistent with reality. Many believe that member checking is simply the act of research participants reviewing the verbatim transcripts of interviews, ensuring that the content is accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, it is a substantially more in-depth and valuable process. Through member-checking, I was able to share my initial findings, including emerging themes, with participants and receive feedback as to whether my findings appeared valid (Merriam, 2009).

Data saturation is also a valuable tool to the researcher as it indicates the point where the researcher finds no new data and where no new themes emerge from the information collected (Merriam, 2009). At the outset of the study, it was not possible to determine the point at which data saturation would be achieved (Ragin & Amoroso, 2019). Therefore, to ensure that I achieved data saturation, I began with a larger sample and reduced the sample at the point where data saturation occurred (Patton, 2015). It was for this reason that I began with a larger participant list and was able to end interviews as the appearance of new themes became less frequent. This broad pool from which to pull allowed me a greater opportunity to reach data saturation.
Finally, it is vital that both the researcher and the readers are aware of any biases that may impact the research (Merriam, 2009). In this study, I maintained a reflexive journal where I addressed the questions posed by Patton (2015), evaluating myself and my knowledge and perspective as well as the topical knowledge and perspectives of both my participants and readers. Through such introspection, I not only gained greater insights into my participants and their experiences, but I also became more aware of my past experiences and how those experiences influenced my interpretations in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Bracketing**

Because the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research, it is imperative to recognize, if not eliminate, bias in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By employing reflexive practices, I was able to recognize my bias regarding the study and acknowledge where my experiences may have influenced the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The simple act of memoing or taking notes in a reflexive journal helped me to become aware of any areas of bias, addressing them and allowing them to be set aside so that they did not impact the research study. The specific act of setting these biases aside is considered bracketing in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To properly bracket my biases, I used a journal to make notes regarding my thoughts and assumptions. However, to ensure that my reflexivity did not overtake the true purpose of the study, I did not include all of this information in the study; instead, I allowed the research to tell the stories of leaders of higher education institutions in the southeastern United States and the challenges they faced when managing and engaging workers who were forced to transition to virtual work.
Summary of Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research faces greater challenges to its rigor, reliability, and validity than quantitative research. This is because quantitative research has statistical measures for validity built into their data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this qualitative multiple case study, I employed several tactics to ensure that the data were collected in an ethical manner and evaluated without bias. To do this, I first looked to the construction of the study, utilizing multiple sources of data to achieve a congruence of information; I also wrote rich, thick descriptions, allowing for an audit trail, and employed reflexive journaling and memos to ensure proper bracketing of researcher bias.

Summary of Section 2 and Transition

Section 2 provided readers with a detailed examination of the methodology used in the research study. This section explained the researcher’s purpose in selecting a flexible, multiple case study to answer the research questions. The decision for this methodology was grounded in my worldview of pragmatism. After providing the rationale for the selected methodology, I described the population selected for the research study and explained the sampling method used in the research study. Here, I noted the specific parameters that were used to determine how participants were chosen.

In this section, I also explained how I collected, analyzed, and presented the data. I used the MAXQDA software to code and analyze data. Additionally, I explained the methods that were used to ensure the reliability and validity of this qualitative multiple case study. These methods included the use of rich, thick descriptions, member checking, and triangulation through the collection of data from multiple sources, called data triangulation. Finally, Section 2 provided
readers with an explanation of how I used memoing and reflexive journaling as methods of bracketing, thus reducing the chance of bias in the research study.

In Section 3, I will provide readers with a detailed explanation of the findings of my field study. This section will cover how the findings of the research study have answered the research questions, supported the anticipated themes, and related back to the review of the literature. Here, I will also explain how this research study may impact business practices and provide insights into how the findings of this study can be used to improve these practices. Finally, Section 3 will provide readers with a better understanding of my thoughts on how this process has impacted me both personally and professionally.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Overview of the Study

In March, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges and universities across the world closed their physical doors, sent their students home, and asked their workforce to become remote employees. Workers who had never intended to work from home found themselves attempting to set up makeshift offices that replicated the ones they were familiar with at the school. Many also dealt with multiple distractions: family working and schooling in the same “office”; concerns for the health of their loved ones; learning new technologies to complete tasks which were once much simpler. The purpose of this research study was to explore the challenges faced by organizational leaders of private higher educational institutions during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, often resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement. In addition, this research explored the methods available to these leaders to increase engagement and productivity among their employees.
A thorough review of the literature guided me as I developed the following research questions to better understand the challenges facing leaders of private higher educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RQ1: What challenges do leaders in higher educational institutions face when moving to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?

RQ1a: What can leaders do to overcome these challenges?

RQ1b: In what ways can these leaders adapt to challenges to successfully transition?

RQ2: How does working in a virtual environment differ from a traditional brick-and-mortar institution?

RQ3: How does faculty and staff engagement impact the organizational performance of a higher educational institution after quickly transitioning to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?

With the research questions developed and all approvals in place, I began data collection by reaching out to institutions located in the southeastern United States. Two private institutions in Georgia agreed to participate, and in February and March of 2022, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with members of these institutions. Interview participants were in supervisory leadership positions ranging from vice president to department director and also included one member from each institution’s COVID task force. I was fortunate that at least half of all potential participants agreed to be interviewed, and as the interviews progressed, new insights, themes, and discoveries grew smaller, indicating data saturation was reached (Patton, 2015). The semi-structured nature of the interviews transformed the interview to more of a conversation, where the participants shared insights and discussed the challenges they faced on a very personal level. This allowed me to gain deep, information-rich data (Miles et al., 2020).
The data from interviews, white papers, institution press releases, and website posts were loaded into MAXQDA. Using this system, I was able to code and analyze the data, generating several new themes while answering the research questions and confirming the anticipated themes. This software offered several opportunities to visualize the data in different ways, which allowed me to gain even greater understanding of the many ways that the data were interrelated.

**Presentation of the Findings**

This study explored the challenges faced by organizational leaders of private higher educational institutions during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, often resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement. Through gaining a greater understanding of the experiences of institutional leaders during this period, it is possible recognize the challenges they faced, how these challenges were impacted by leadership style, and the impact of the virtual environment on the engagement and management of employees. The primary method of data collection for this study was a semi-structured interview where leaders were encouraged to provide details of their experience leading their departments during the COVID-19 pandemic. To guide the research study, the following research questions were developed and answered through this study:

RQ1: What challenges do leaders in higher educational institutions face when moving to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?

RQ1a: What can leaders do to overcome these challenges?

RQ1b: In what ways can these leaders adapt to challenges to successfully transition?

RQ2: How does working in a virtual environment differ from a traditional brick and mortar institution?
RQ3: How does faculty and staff engagement impact the organizational performance of a higher educational institution after quickly transitioning to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?

To protect the confidentiality of the organizations and participants of this study, each higher educational institution (HEI) will simply be referred to as HEI 1 and HEI 2, while study participants will be identified by names generated with the prefix indicating their institution (HEI 1 or HEI 2) and a unique, randomly generated number (e.g., HEI 1-1).

Vignettes

HEI 1 is a non-profit institution in Georgia located in an area categorized as being in a small city setting, according to IPEDS data. The small city designation indicates that the institution is in an urbanized area with a population up to 100,000. This institution has an enrollment between 2,500 and 5,000 and a staff of close to 250, not including faculty. Like many schools in Georgia, HEI 1 moved students, staff, and faculty online in March 2020. Students returned for online instruction in the fall semester of 2020, while faculty and staff were surveyed and returned based on both comfort level and their risk-level for contracting COVID-19. Under this model, many workers remained off campus for the 2020–21 academic year. Decisions for HEI 1 were made using a distributed leadership model with the organization forming a COVID task force. The task force was made up of institutional leaders and medical professionals with final decisions approved by the institution president.

When I reached out to this institution, a list of 15 leaders was provided with eight agreeing to participate. From these interviews and documents obtained from the institution website, 602 coded segments were created, based on 67 codes. The leaders interviewed for this study include those who served on the institution’s COVID Task Force, upper-level leadership
(vice presidents and assistant vice presidents), and mid-level managers (department heads or directors), allowing me to gain a data-rich perspective of the experiences of those involved (Merriam, 2009).

HEI 2 is also a non-profit institution located in Georgia. Its location is classified by IPEDS as a town: distant, which indicates that it is between 10 and 35 miles of an urbanized area. The institution has a student enrollment of up to 2,500 and a staff of approximately 200, not including faculty. HEI 2 moved all services online with workers going remote in March 2020. Students, faculty, and staff returned to the campus for the fall semester of 2020 with very few exceptions for those who were medically fragile or had members of their household who were considered at-risk. This school also formed a COVID task force, made up of institutional leaders and members of the health services department, to address the decisions that had to be made related to the pandemic. Following this distributed leadership model, the institution’s president had final say and made decisions informed by the members of the task force.

HEI 2 provided information for eight institutional leaders, with four agreeing to participate in interviews. Based on these interviews and a document search of the institution’s website, 283 coded segments were generated based on the same 67 codes used to analyze HEI 1. The leaders interviewed for this study included those who served on the institution’s COVID Task Force, upper-level leadership (assistant vice president rank), and mid-level managers (department heads and directors), which allowed me to understand the challenges from multiple levels of administration.

The top 26 codes are listed in the table below; these are the codes that are found in more than half of all interviews and documents.

Table 3
### Primary Codes from Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Coded Segments</th>
<th>Documents Where Code Appears</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated themes/resilience and flexibility are key/resilience</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review/leadership role</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise themes/organizational perception/positive</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/concepts/virtual work environments impact employee engagement</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/constructs/job design/autonomy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/constructs/leadership style</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/theories/Maslow's</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review/organizational behavior</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated themes/leadership type impacts success</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anticipated themes/resilience and flexibility are key/flexibility</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated themes/supportive measures increase commitment</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/concepts/employee needs are impacted by crisis situations</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/constructs/employee engagement</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/constructs/leadership style/distributed leadership</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review/change management</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review/technology-based issues</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem/challenge/communication</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated themes/supportive measures increase commitment/social integration (virtual watercooler)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/concepts/organizational performance is related to employee engagement</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/constructs/organizational culture</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem/challenge</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Coded Segments</th>
<th>Documents Where Code Appears</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework/concepts/employee engagement is related to employee needs/satisfaction</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review/strategic planning</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review/work–life balance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem/challenge/time</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise themes/virtual work changed processes</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discovery and Interpretation of Themes**

Through this research study, several themes emerged related to understanding the challenges facing leaders of higher educational institutions during periods of crisis in engaging and managing workers who were forced to shift to virtual work environments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These not only focused on the specific challenges that leaders encountered, but also the insights gained from these leaders as to how they worked through those challenges and engaged employees during the crisis. This study examined the role that the leader plays in how employees perceive and react to crisis situations, impacting employee as well as organizational success and highlighting the claims made by Dirani et al. (2020) that supportive leadership increases employee motivation. Additionally, areas such as communication, strategic planning, and a focus on change management, all areas of high-leader responsibility, were found to strongly influence employees who were working remotely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A unique and unexpected theme to emerge from this study is that employees have strong, positive reactions to the mere act of asking for their input and participation.

**Supportive Leaders Are Vital to Employee Success in Crisis Periods.** Lagowska et al. (2020) explained that leadership is important during periods of crisis, noting that employees look to their leader for guidance through the troubling times. This study highlights the importance of leadership during crisis, especially those behaviors seen as supportive. For example, a leader
who serves as a coach, helping their employees—even those employees who supervise others—to read situations and use their strengths to address the challenges they are facing was found to create an environment for success (Hunt & Weintraub, 2017). A specific instance at HEI 1 shows the value of a leader who coaches their employees. This situation involved a manager who was having issues in their department working remotely together. The coaching leader suggested weekly Zoom meetings for the struggling department. HEI 1-1 noted that these meetings have helped significantly by building cohesiveness in this new work environment. To ensure success, the organizational leader maintained communication with the manager, which Dirani et al. (2020) described as a supportive measure which increases engagement and motivation among workers.

Harb et al. (2020) posited that transformational leaders have greater success in developing employee commitment, especially those leaders who are willing to model expected behavior, or “practice what they preach.” This style of leadership is also shown to grow employees’ organizational citizenship behavior, which leads to increased organizational performance (Hamsani et al., 2019; Sharafizad et al., 2019). HEI 1-5 noted that, when the time came to return to campus, she would be there because she would not ask her workers to do that which she would not do herself. These leaders also exhibited transformational leadership characteristics, where they are not focused on exchanges between themselves and their workers, but instead look to the whole person and how to enable them to grow while also meeting the needs of the organization (Manning & Curtis, 2021). This form of leadership was seen through the actions of several leaders described in this study. For example, HEI 2-1 explained, “I still say I will be the last one standing on the ship” while another supervisor stated, “I tried to make sure that my team was supported” (HEI 2-3), and still another said, “I wanted them to know that I still
care about them and I still wanna support them. And just maintain that personal touch” (HEI 1-5). The experiences of these leaders add to the support for the findings of Abdullahi et al. (2020) that the style of leadership used impacts the effectiveness of leaders seeking to motivate workers.

**In Virtual Environments, Employees Need Effective Communication.** Although the importance of communication is vital to organizational success in general, its necessity in virtual environments cannot be overstated. Indeed, Lagowska et al. (2020) pointed to communication as a key factor in determining the reactions of employees during times of crisis. This study indicates that not only is communication a factor in the manner in which employees react to the crisis, but effective communication increases the support of employees during a crisis. For example, several interview participants spoke of the value they found using Zoom sessions, chat tools, and traditional phone calls. This was especially true when attempting to offer training to employees on new practices that were adopted in response to the shift to virtual work. Here, video conferencing tools allowed users to “remote control” screens of other users, allowing them to show, step by step, the new processes. In this sense, a communication method stood in place of face-to-face interactions and allowed leaders to support their employees and convey important messages regarding changes. Such supportive communication methods were able to combat the strain placed on employees and disengagement that can occur with poor communication of changes (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019).

**Positive Perception Is Based on Institution Planning, Supportive Leadership, and Change Management.** The reaction to the crisis of those interviewed at both institutions was overwhelmingly positive, which was surprising, as a majority of the research showed that such a shift is typically difficult for those involved (Bundy et al., 2017; Galanti et al., 2021; Lagowska et al., 2020). However, while those interviewed for this study noted that there were
challenges that included adjustments to new technologies and difficulty in communication (which will be covered in greater detail in the alignment with RQ1), their praise of the organizational response and that of organization leaders in the face of those challenges was impressive. Comments like “I really can't say enough good things about the way [HEI 1] handled our move. I thought it was, all things considered, seamless as much as it could be” (HEI 1-1), and “It seemed to work very well. It evolved as the virus evolved, but we . . . from my perspective, we were very, very successful with the whole thing” (HEI 2-4) were not uncommon throughout the interview process.

In looking at the context of many comments, the common themes for such positive responses lay in the institutions’ planning efforts, the organizations’ leaders and the use of supportive change management techniques. For example, HEI 1-6 noted that their institution’s history with working in an online environment (for student education) for more than 20 years aided in the efforts to move operations online, as it informed the direction the institution might take in certain areas such as software and hardware needs. This was corroborated by a “State of the University” presentation given by HEI 1 leadership in 2020, which noted that previous administrators had instituted practices that made the transition online for all workers much more seamless in terms of their abilities to complete their jobs and serve the institution’s students. HEI 2 also benefitted from effective planning, with one participant (HEI 2-4) noting that the transition seemed well planned and well thought out.

A second area where participants consistently praised the leadership was in the role those institutional leaders took in addressing the transition. HEI 2-2 explained that their institution’s leadership did an amazing job and she was actually surprised by how easily the transition was made. HEI 1 was applauded by participants for essentially creating a marketing campaign for
employees to increase engagement in the efforts of the university. These videos were typically sent out weekly, though more often if additional communication was necessary, and consisted of the university’s president directing a specific message at the people who were keeping the institution running. HEI 1-3 noted that, while some may have laughed, everyone at the institution knew that their leader would start each video noting that employees were missed and valued. In the ways that these institutions addressed the move to virtual work environments, it is obvious that organizational leadership worked to develop plans and offer consistent, clear communication throughout the crisis period (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019).

Finally, the importance of using effective change management techniques was apparent in the praise of organizational employees. As Fugate and Soenen (2018) explained, change management support is a strong predictor of whether or not employees will accept change. Simply, support from leadership in enacting changes and guiding employees through the new practices increases not only the employees’ willingness to make the change, but it can also increase their productivity through increased commitment (Aujla & Mclarney, 2020). This was seen in the positive responses of organizational leaders as they looked back at the many changes that were thrust upon employees as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, HEI 1-3 pointed out that many of those workers who were most resistant to the changes became the greatest champions for its success. These employees increased their commitment and took on the challenge of the change in response to leadership support. HEI 1-7 even noted that, prior to the pandemic, she did not believe she would be able to do her work remotely, but now claims that while challenging at times, it was “smooth sailing” because of the support that she received. A participant from HEI 2 (HEI 2-4) explained that her institution’s efforts to communicate the
reasoning behind changes and the scientific support for changes led to increased support in her department.

**Employees Want to be Heard.** This study, without any specific intention, also found that employees respond to the simple act of asking for their thoughts and feelings. One of the questions asked about surveys or assessments sent out to employees gauging their feelings about the institutional response to the pandemic. While it was not necessarily the intention of this question to determine the mere feeling of being asked, one of the general responses did relate to this idea. For example, HEI 1-5 stated, “I always just appreciate being asked how I feel, being asked my preferences, being asked how things are affecting me” while HEI 2-2 noted:

I can honestly say no one contacted my office and said, "Are you all . . . Is your staff ready to come back or do you feel comfortable . . ." Nobody asked that question . . . It would have been great if they had and I probably would have said, "If you need us back, we're back."

These findings align with a recent study by Joynt (2019), who noted that feelings of not being heard led to increased disengagement and other negative work behaviors. The sector for this study (clergy) is quite different from higher education; however, the findings align with a great deal of advice provided at the outset of the pandemic. Both Bingham (2021) and Zheng (2020) pointed to benefits that come from engaging workers through input, which includes increased job satisfaction, motivation, and trust among remote workers.

Transformational leadership is focused on “assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings” (Northouse, 2019, p. 163). Alternatively, Fernandez and Shaw (2020) pointed out that servant leadership focuses heavily on human connections, communication, and collaboration. Considering the focus of these two approaches
to leadership, it would make sense that such approaches that seek input are effective at engaging and managing workers during crisis periods. Indeed, Abdullahi et al. (2020) pointed to transformational leadership as a form of leadership which increases workers’ willingness to go beyond the call of duty. It would make sense, then, that these forms of leadership are seen as more beneficial during periods of crisis when employee engagement and commitment are necessary for organizational success.

**Representation and Visualization of the Data**

The data collected from this study can be represented in multiple ways. Because the primary means for evaluating data is visual, where the qualitative data is gathered and coded and the researcher creates visualizations that show patterns developing and which can be displayed in either a progressive or traditional format, this report will show the results of data collection as well as the data’s interconnectivity using these methods (Miles et al., 2020). Figure 3 presents a word cloud of the codes generated across data collection.
The word cloud image in Figure 3 shows the primary codes generated in the data analysis of this study. Code frequency is indicated by the size of the word in the cloud, with the largest word indicating the one with the greatest frequency. As can be seen in the image, leadership role was seen to be a common thread throughout the data analysis process.

This research study began with a visual representation of the expected relationships between concepts, as shown in the research framework (see Figure 1). After conducting the field study and data analysis, this framework changed slightly as shown in the updated diagram in Figure 4.
Relationships Between the Findings

Going Virtual: Addressing the Challenges Faced by Organizational Leaders When Employees Transition to Virtual Environments in Times of Crisis
Perhaps the most obvious thing to notice between this updated diagram in Figure 4 and the original in Figure 1 is the greater interconnectedness of each of the components of the research. The field study showed a much greater reliance and impact on several of the concepts. While this will be discussed in greater detail in the section aligning the findings with the research framework, it was initially thought that there would be very singular connections between the individual concepts; instead, each concept was related to the other, and in turn related to other constructs and themes. For example, I initially tied job design solely to employee commitment. However, after my analysis of the data, I realized that job design is also closely related to employee engagement and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

Additionally, the various constructs, theories, and concepts showed a much greater connectivity. Although I assumed they were valuable from the outset, the research indicated that they are a key to understanding the problem and influence one another on a much greater scale. As this framework is more complex than previously thought, a brief description is presented before explaining the impact on the concepts from the field study.

Organizational performance is now displayed as the background or base of the diagram, indicating that all aspects of the field study should be considered part of the concepts of organizational performance. This idea is also true for the actor: private colleges and universities in the southeastern United States. Inside of these, the concepts, theories, actors, and constructs have not changed. Each of these now has additional connecting lines, indicating how the item impacts or is impacted by the other items. The increased connectivity will be discussed in detail in the section entitled “The Conceptual Framework.”
The research questions developed for this study sought to address the specific problem of the study, which focused on the challenges facing leaders of higher education organizations in the southeastern United States who may have seen diminished organizational performance as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While these leaders faced challenges on many fronts, the specific problem targeted the challenges related to managing and engaging workers who had to quickly transition to remote work environments. Through these questions, I hoped to understand the experiences of these leaders as they moved their workers online and how they viewed this environment compared to their traditional campuses. Finally, I attempted to discern the impact of the changed environment on the leaders’ perceptions of organizational performance. This section presents the findings of the research study in relation to the research questions.

RQ1: What challenges do leaders in higher educational institutions face when moving to a virtual environment during periods of crisis? In speaking with this diverse group of leaders, it was possible to discern several distinct challenges they faced in moving their workforce rapidly to virtual work environments. One of the most often mentioned challenges centered around time, for various reasons. For example, no one knew or could plan for a situation such as this, with HEI 1-2 noting that at the beginning, “There was a period of trying to, I think, initially assess, again if this was going to be long lasting.” This participant elaborated that, as a part of his institution’s COVID Task Force (the decision-informing body during the pandemic), they were constantly addressing immediate concerns, one right after the other. Essentially, decisions were having to be made quickly in a constantly evolving environment and, especially at the beginning, there was not time to be as contemplative as one may have wanted. This sentiment was echoed by HEI 2-2 who spoke of the rapid transition, where the institution
told managers that their workers would transition to working from home in just a few days and
they needed to make sure everyone had what was needed at their homes to complete their tasks.

A second challenge focused on technology—the need for technology, offices that were
predominantly paper needing to rapidly transition to alternative options, and workers who
struggled with technology. HEI 1-1 pointed out that “one person . . . she didn’t have internet, and
she was only using her phone.” While there were people who needed additional access to
technology, there were also entire departments who, prior to the transition to virtual work, were
almost entirely paper-driven. HEI 2-1 explained that “the Department of Education still loves
paper” which meant that much of their work was forced to remain on paper. HEI 2-2 also noted
that, in their department:

  We are not paperless application, and we have about 10 different documents that we
collect for each application. And so, we weren't able . . . We weren't collecting these. So,
the person that does all of that was having to enter the information, but we just knew in
the back of our head, “When we come back to the office, we're gonna have to have a
couple of days of just printing stuff.”

This was a sentiment seconded by HEI 1-1 who said, “We had forms. We had paper forms.
Students would walk into the registrar's office, and they would take the forms . . . we had to
make everything electronic.”

The challenge of moving processes online was difficult for many of those interviewed,
but equally challenging was moving workers to virtual environments who did not use technology
extensively in their role prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant described working
with an employee who had challenges with technology in general, but when processes were
moved virtual, many of that person’s duties had to be reassigned because she could not make the
transition. This challenge was echoed by another participant who had workers who were attempting to learn new ways to communicate when they had previously used face-to-face interactions.

Lastly, communication was a challenge mentioned by many participants, whether it was a lack of communication, miscommunication, or the proper and most effective communication; these leaders all agreed that the ability to communicate with their staff was made more difficult with the shift to remote work. HEI 1-1 explained, “Things happened without communicating them to me, that were a little frustrating.” HEI 2-1 explained that staff meetings had to change from monthly to twice per week to ensure that everyone was on the same page with regard to duties and the projects that they were working on. Alternatively, HEI 1-2, who serves in an administrative position, pointed out that from an institutional perspective efforts to effectively communicate tended to backfire, explaining, “We had moments when we may have over-communicated or we had so much effort to communicate, it was counterproductive.”

**RQ1a: What can leaders do to overcome these challenges?** For the first challenge of time and decision-making, several of the leaders pointed to their workers and their institution’s COVID Task Force (both institutions used this model and name for their leadership group that advised the decision-making during the pandemic). Multiple leaders from HEI 1 explained that their COVID Task Force was made up of medical professionals as well as various leaders from the institution in areas that were impacted by the decisions being made. HEI 2 described the makeup of their COVID Task Force in a similar manner, where diverse institutional members were brought together to inform the president and others tasked with making decisions that impacted their constituency. This form of decision-making aligns with the findings of Dirani et al. (2020) that the “challenges of a complex crisis like the current pandemic requires more than
leaders acting alone” (p. 390). The reason for the need for many working together may be best summarized by HEI 1-2, who said, “The diversity of ideas, the diversity of perception around the table has really helped us.”

The challenge of technology required efforts from multiple sectors, including information technology and staff development. For example, HEI 1-7 explained that “there were employees who . . . didn't have the understanding of how to log in from home and have remote access, so there was that concern, but . . . I think our IT department pretty quickly handled those concerns” in describing how the technology department stepped in to both support and train individuals on the technologies they would be using while working remotely. HEI 2-4 also pointed out that her institution offered training opportunities for employees to better understand the new tools that they were utilizing. For those who had to move processes online that were previously paper-based, many leaders pointed to their amazing teams for coming together and coming up with ways to simply get the work done. HEI 2-4 describes the feeling of attempting to move an event online from a previously face-to-face format, explaining:

It was definitely a team effort, just within my office, to make that happen, and like I said, we spun on a dime. It was just like my old brain was like, “Oh, we're gonna have to cancel.” And they're like, “No, we're gonna do this and this and this, and this, and this, and this,” and it worked.

Other leaders pointed to their institution using software to address these issues, pointing out the use of tools such as Formstack, and online form building software, to move documents online which were not previously available.

Finally, to address the challenge of communication, all leaders involved agreed that conferencing tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams were vital to the success of their workers
during the period that they worked remotely. HEI 1-1 pointed out that it actually made her team stronger, explaining it this way:

Even though it was remote, we would always start off our meetings just checking in generally, how is everybody doing, and then we would go into issues and projects, ’cause we have so many projects here but it was always a good opportunity just to kind of meet and greet, if you will. And yeah, so it was very, very helpful for us, for our team.

Other leaders noted that even the more traditional methods of communication were used widely, leading to an easier transition for her team: “Every day we communicated, if not by phone, but we communicated through emails and everything like that, so the transition was very smooth” (HEI 2-2).

**RQ1b: In what ways can these leaders adapt to challenges to successfully transition?**

The common thread to leaders’ answers regarding this question is supporting their employees, offering grace to themselves and others, and generally having the right people in place to make the transition. HEI 2-1 highlighted the importance of her staff when she explained, “I'm telling you the staff was remarkable. I still, and I praised them. I gave them every bit of the credit.” In this leader’s praise of her staff, it is evident that she is a leader who possesses leadership traits of humility, support, and encouragement. A second common thread is empathy, compassion, and grace, with HEI 1-5 stating, “I just tried to continue to be compassionate with my people. I tried to be compassionate with myself.” HEI 1-2 explained his institution’s success as a response to “human components, some of the empathy and grace, unconditional cost of regard, some of the willingness to be nimble and to change on the dime.”

Not one leader interviewed pointed to their own leadership as a key to success, instead deferring to the people whom they led. However, many of the ideas that they shared point to
leadership characteristics that have been shown to be most effective in dealing with crisis situations. This concept aligns closely with the findings of Izzah et al. (2020) who claimed that leaders who work to motivate and create environments where employees feel secure increase employee performance during crises.

RQ2: How does working in a virtual environment differ from a traditional brick-and-mortar institution? Perhaps one of the best descriptions of the virtual work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic was provided by HEI 1-6. He stated:

One of the challenges of working in an isolated manner, virtually, if you will, is that your tasks, everything seems at a critical level. There's no slow-down. And I think part of that is sometimes . . . And it depends on the way people are wired. If they're very self-motivated and they're kind of their hardest critic, like I am for me, and I think a lot of people are, a lot of leaders are, it's . . . When you become isolated, it's like, "Alright, I've gotta be doing something. What is the next fire I have to put out?" And everything becomes mission critical. And the reality is there are very few things that are truly on fire.

But when you're isolated, everything seems like it's on fire.

During this period, workers may have felt isolated at times, and many experienced feelings of urgency. This was echoed by several participants in different ways, with some explaining that they were just doing what had to be done to respond to the situation, while others noted that “people were hunkered down and trying to make it day-by-day living in very tight compartments” (HEI 1-2). Many of the comments relate to workers simply attempting to survive and get their work done.

The physical environments differed as well, with availability of technology impacting the ways that workers completed their tasks. For example, one participant explained that their entire
office operated using multiple monitors to easily compare data. To mimic that, several workers
took a monitor home with them. These environments also contained new and different
distractions. HEI 1-4 described these, saying “I got the dogs barking in the middle of a meeting
or something… And then there's my son that's running around here 'cause he's got cabin fever.
So our whole conversation changed with students, with each other.” These serve as excellent
examples of the newly virtual environment described by the various participants. Many workers
had makeshift offices with distractions that did not previously exist.

RQ3: How does staff engagement impact the organizational performance of a
higher educational institution after quickly transitioning to a virtual environment during
periods of crisis? This question had a surprising answer from the majority of participants.
Overall, most felt that productivity actually increased for themselves and their workers. HEI 1-2
explained that the resilience of his institution’s employees “despite what I think may have been
in many cases a lack of resources, was inspiring.” HEI 2-3 described her personal perspective,
noting that when working in person, she has many more tasks in front of her (literally)
demanding her attention, while “going home and being able to control interactions a little bit
more than somebody just walking in the office, I actually became more productive at home.”

There were, obviously, those who did not fall into this category of increased productivity.
Participants from both HEI 1 and HEI 2 described workers who were not able to keep up after
the shift to remote work. HEI 1-8 noted that she was forced to let a worker go because the person
was consistently disengaged in their job duties and as a result, work was not being completed in
a timely manner or with the quality needed for their department. HEI 2-1 also described a
situation where a worker had to have others take on many of her duties because she was unable
to grasp the technology necessary to complete the tasks in a timely manner.
**The Conceptual Framework**

The findings of this study show that the conceptual framework was relatively accurate regarding its content. However, the connections between the concepts, theories, actors, and constructs were more significant than I could have anticipated. For example, the original framework recognized that the concept “Employee needs are impacted by crisis situations” and “Employee engagement is related to employee satisfaction and needs” would closely associate with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory. This connection was confirmed through the field study with managers acknowledging the struggles their workers had with mental health related to isolation, fear (of both the virus and their employment situation), and anxiety. Many workers who were not previously on medication, including some of those who were interviewed, found themselves on prescriptions for anxiety in an attempt to deal with the stress of the situation.

Similarly, employee engagement was impacted by this period. HEI 1-5 pointed out that “a lot of women quit just 'cause they were like, ‘I can't do it. I'm losing my mind and no one's schooling these kids. I have to do it.’ So we lost a lot of women from the workforce.” One participant at HEI 2 explained that she was actually stepping back from the position that she was working in during the pandemic because the stress and work during that period took away from her enjoyment of her position. As mentioned, these connections were expected. However, “Employee needs are impacted by crisis situations” was also found to be closely related to the discovered theme that in virtual environments, employees need effective communication. One leader at HEI 1 explained:

It's not fun anymore. So at that point, yeah, when we . . . We did what we could do to just socialize with one another. And instead of a phone call, we would actually get on Google
Hangout and video each other just for a quick chat, just to have some face-to-face interaction. (HEI 1-4)

Similarly, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was confirmed to work in conjunction with the concepts of “Employee needs are impacted by crisis situations” and “Employee engagement is related to employee satisfaction and needs.” However, the field study discovered that Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was also seen through employees’ job design during the COVID-19 pandemic. HEI 1-3 explained that, for her institution’s workers, their needs and concerns were taken into account when determining their return-to-work schedule. She stated, “I think that that's one of the smartest things that we did, I think everybody really appreciated that for now, let them each choose what they were comfortable with.” Not only did the organization’s leaders recognize the fears of their workers, but they also gave them a level of autonomy in their job design that was not previously available to them.

Employee commitment was noted to be related to job design, but was also seen to be interconnected with leadership type (especially transformational leadership theory), employee engagement, and the discovered theme that supportive leaders are vital to employee success in crisis periods. HEI 1-3 noted that her institution and its president took on a “marketing campaign. It branded itself. And that was what the presidential videos and emails going out. Welcome. Hello [HEI 1] community. I come to you today because I continue to miss you. And I'm going to tell you three things.” She explained that, while people may have giggled every now and then, it did make them feel appreciated, welcomed, and a part of something bigger. At HEI 2, HEI 2-4 tells of the approach she took with her employees in an attempt to ensure that they did not experience burnout, telling them, “Listen, you all have sick time, you all have vacation time. I know it's not gonna be very easy to get 40 hours a week. . . . Don't be afraid to
take a vacation day or take some sick time.” These actions showed the employees that they are valued and appreciated, not just by the administration, but also by the institution. Harb et al. (2020) explained that this behavior by organizational leaders creates an emotional bond with the employees because they see the leader as a representative of their institution, which increases the employees’ commitment. It is for this reason, also, that leadership style was found to be far more interconnected to the other concepts beyond simply institutional leadership.

**Anticipated Themes**

Based on the review of the literature, this study developed these themes:

1. Organizational resilience and flexibility are keys to thriving in crisis situations.
2. Productivity in virtual environments requires supportive measures to insure motivation.
3. Leadership type impacts success.

Organizational resilience and flexibility generated more than 40 coded segments across 14 documents. Nearly all of the leaders interviewed mentioned the impact of flexibility or implied that resilience was vital to their ability to react to the challenges of the pandemic. HEI 1-1 discussed the need to be flexible in work hours to ensure that the job is done when workers were able, claiming, “I think we all learned to be flexible and to do what we needed to do, how we could find the best time to do it.” This need for flexibility was seconded by HEI 1-3, who said that she and other leaders “helped talk people through. It's okay to break this policy for right now, and these are the reasons. It doesn't mean it has to be this way forever, but it's also not gonna be the end of the world.”

It was not just HEI 1 who recognized the ability to remain flexible. HEI 2-1 explained that, in response to the challenges, “Everything kinda happened, just . . . It just happened and we
kind of molded to it.” Their commitment to flexibility and to quickly recover or respond to challenges was recognized by the president of HEI 2, who commended them in an address to school: “The [HEI 2] family has revealed itself to be resilient, creative, kind, and committed to ensuring that our students have every opportunity to advance toward their degrees despite the current circumstances.”

Supportive measures were also found to help workers remain engaged in their groups and tasks. HEI 1-8 describes a meeting where she was encouraged by her supervisor “to talk about if we had any frustrations, if we were feeling depressed or if we were worn out from Zooms, if we were feeling down and out just to get it all out. Tell him my frustrations.” She pointed out that this meeting helped her to feel better about the situation, and it allowed her to move forward with increased energy. Such support was also available at HEI 2, where HEI 2-3 pointed out, “We always had somebody to turn to, like we never felt like we were scratching our heads or being left out in the cold trying to figure out how do we make this work, and we had a great support.”

Finally, this field study showed that specific leadership approaches were especially effective in helping the organization navigate the pandemic. The importance of supportive leadership types is evident in the impact of the measures taken to encourage greater employee engagement. However, the study also found that the use of distributed leadership at these institutions was highly effective. As Fernandez and Shaw (2020) explained, traditional, top-down leadership may not be as “successful in an academic context when facing a crisis that is so unpredictable and complex in nature” and that “distributing leadership responsibilities is more effective than other leadership approaches in a crisis” (p. 43). HEI 1-2 explained that the reason for such success lay in the organization’s ability to gain the perspectives of a diverse group, allowing for an increase in innovative ideas.
**The Literature**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that an examination of the literature allows the researcher to “use the scholarly literature in a study to present results of similar studies, to relate the present study to an ongoing dialogue in the literature, and to provide a framework for comparing results of a study with other studies” (p. 87). The literature review for this study presented many aspects which play a role in the challenges of organizational leaders to engage and manage workers who quickly pivot to remote work environments as a result of crisis situations. It also considered potential leadership behaviors that would increase the likelihood of successful navigation of such challenges.

Many aspects of the literature review proved to be accurate in the field study that I conducted. The role of leadership during the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic was confirmed by the leaders interviewed, who pointed to the importance of understanding their workers and how the situation impacted them. For example, HEI 1-4 explained that “as a member of leadership . . . you have to put yourself in their shoes. And you have to think about how this is affecting you, then chances are it's affecting them.” HEI 2-3 pointed to the importance of communication as a way of supporting her employees: “I tried to make sure that my team was supported. Again, my management style is such that we kinda understood and knew, we just communicate.” Even when leaders knew that decisions were being made with which they did not agree, they wanted to ensure that their workers felt supported at the department level; HEI 2-3 explained:

We weren't gonna have a choice, but I didn't want people to feel hurt. So I hope that everybody in their areas, at least, made their staff feel like they were heard because there was so much fear. Yeah, I think that was important during that time.
The field study also showed the immense value of staff development, which not only allowed workers to be more confident when working autonomously but also acted as a key ingredient in the organization’s resilience during the crisis (Bundy et al., 2017; Galanti et al., 2021). Many organizations set up opportunities for employees to ask questions. HEI 1-3 explained that her organization offered technical training through “many, many lunch and learns, and different sessions that our instructional designer put together.” She added that the organization also supported workers struggling with work–life balance:

Our director of assessment actually created a guide, I can't remember what it's called, but basically, tips for working at home. Tips for not feeling lonely, and resources, and ways to engage, and ways to, especially if you're not leaving the same space, how to continue to have a work–life balance. How to set up a workstation so that you could differentiate work time and work space from home, how to stay focused, things like that.

Development was a key concept echoed by many participants. HEI 2-4 told me of training courses on various videoconferencing software, as her institution offered both Zoom and Microsoft Teams, while also supporting workers learning how to more effectively use the tools available to them in their Microsoft Outlook accounts.

Other areas that were evident in the field study that were also prevalent in the review of literature were the importance of strategic planning, change management, and organizational behavior. Stephens (2017) explained that a changing environment would impact the plan that an organization implemented. This idea was especially true during the shift to remote working, for which many organizations did not have a specific plan. HEI 1-6 explained that policies even had to be changed, noting that “in terms of the HR policy was modified because prior to the pandemic, there was not a work-from-home policy. That quickly changed, really, because it was
just needed, because it became a necessity.” The pandemic also helped leaders to understand that “we don't have to be this rigid organization where change is difficult and where the people you're interacting with are constantly on the go” (HEI 1-2).

It was important that when these decisions were made and changes implemented, the leadership worked to implement effective change management practices to ensure commitment of workers during a period of high volatility (Bundy et al., 2017). This was reflected in the comments made by participants, with HEI-7 noting, “If someone would have said, ‘Can you do your job 100% remotely from home?’ I think before, I would have been like, ‘No, I don't believe I can,’ but we made it work.” Another leader (HEI 2-4) mentioned, “It was very well planned, and it worked very . . . It seemed to work very well. It evolved as the virus evolved, but we . . . From my perspective, we were very, very successful with the whole thing.”

As Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) explained, the literature review for this research study told a story of the many aspects that shaped the field study. Through the investigative portion of the field study and the data analysis, many concepts that appeared in the review of literature were brought to life. The experiences of organizational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic created a rich picture of many ideas that were initially only possibilities.

The Problem

The specific problem was the potential challenges faced by organizational leaders within private higher educational institutions in the southeastern United States during a rapid transition to virtual work environments due to a crisis, possibly resulting in diminished organizational performance caused by a decrease in employee engagement. It was clear from my discussions with several leaders from two higher education institutions that those organizational leaders faced many challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that time and decision-
making were much more difficult because of the situation. Additionally, they realized that their workers needed greater support and effective communication to be their most successful. Finally, many leaders and their employees found greater productivity while working virtually because, although they faced distractions while at home, they accomplished more when the distractions were less significant.

**Summary of the Findings**

The findings of this research study indicate that although organizational leaders faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, their organizations continued to be productive because they employed specific leadership practices and worked to guide their workers through the crisis. Such findings are in line with the research of many scholars in the area of crisis leadership and effective organizational management, which concludes that leadership is vital in uncertain times (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Kuswardhani, 2020). Further this confirms that employees look toward leaders for guidance and support, and that those leaders who embrace this role empower their workforce to greater resilience (Bartsch et al., 2020; Lagowska et al., 2020; Sharafizad et al., 2019). Additionally, the study found that effective change management skills such as communication were highly beneficial in increasing employee support for change efforts (Shin et al., 2015).

**Application to Professional Practice**

The findings of this research study help to reduce the gaps in the literature regarding leaders in higher education who oversee and engage employees during a rapid transition to a virtual environment during periods of crisis. However, the insights gained through this research could be applied in many different areas of business. The approaches to both leadership and remote work will be forever shaped by the experiences of organizational leaders and their
workers during this pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis on a level that has not been seen in recent history, the lessons learned from this time can be applied to other periods of uncertainty that organizations may face.

**Improving General Business Practice**

There are many practices that take place in organizations which are magnified during periods of crisis. Some of these practices include the role of leadership, staff development, strategic planning, and change management. This section shows how the results of this study can improve these practices.

**Leadership Role.** A leader’s role in times of crisis goes beyond providing a sense of direction for the organization. In a crisis, the leader’s role expands to include sense-making, guidance, and coaching (Bundy et al., 2017; Lagowska et al., 2020). This role is something that was echoed by many of the study’s leadership participants, who described workers who looked to them for increased support after the move to virtual work environments. Through this experience, these leaders found that supportive measures increased employee’s engagement and productivity. The benefit of a leader who engages in supportive behaviors such as consistent communication and one who acts to encourage workers will continue to increase employee commitment to the leader as well as the organization that the leader represents. Participants also pointed to the importance of acting as a guide during uncertain times. During periods of uncertainty, the ability of leaders to provide guidance for employees is key to the organization’s success (Goleman et al., 2001; Lagowska et al., 2020).

**Staff Development.** Bundy et al. (2017) pointed to the importance of development activities to ensure resilience, a key factor in an organization’s ability to weather difficult periods. In addition to creating a more resilient organization, staff development empowers
workers to act in a more autonomous manner in their job functions, which increases engagement
(Galanti et al., 2021). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations increased their
training of their workforce to help them better understand how to perform their jobs in new
ways. This included training on new software or hardware that was not previously used, as
happened with HEI 1, who used a new, online form-building software in response to the shift to
virtual work.

In addition to training for job-related activities, workers received training on maintaining
their work-life balance. This was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many
people saw dramatic changes in their workspaces as a result of stay-at-home orders and other
restrictions on public activities. Participants explained that these interventions, which did not
focus solely on addressing work-specific activities, were helpful to both their workers and
themselves.

**Strategic Planning.** An organization’s ability to survive in a changing world is one of
the primary considerations of strategic planning activities (Aljuhmani & Emeagwali, 2017).
While the expectation is that the environment will change as a result of the general ebb and flow
of the industry, most organizations do not plan for crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic
(Bundy et al., 2017). However, one of the main concepts that participants pointed to when
indicating their ability to make a smooth transition to virtual work environments was the
organization’s ability to shift its plans. Plans that the organizations had put into place were easily
modified to address the increasingly volatile environment.

**Change Management.** While planning activities helps to guide organizations through
change, it is their approach to change management that contributes to the success of their efforts.
This is because an organization’s ability to change in response to its environment, even in the
best of times but especially in periods of crisis, determines its ability to perform against its competitors (Sartori et al., 2018; Schoemaker et al., 2018). Because of the likelihood of employee resistance and fear of change, a plan for change is important to successful transitions and the employees’ acceptance of the implemented changes (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019; Spector, 2013). The findings of this study indicate that when the organization has a plan as well as the change management approach to support that plan, employees are more successful and even become cheerleaders for the process. This information points to the value of effective change management techniques in increasing the success of the change and employee commitment to the change.

**Potential Application Strategies**

The insights gained through this study are valuable but become even more valuable when they can be applied to multiple scenarios. One discussion that took place during the field study was the value of such a study when pandemics tended to happen quite rarely. Indeed, the last time a pandemic ravaged the world was the Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919 where the death and destruction was described like something out of a horror movie (Stern et al., 2010). However, while it is my sincere hope that nothing of this magnitude will hit the planet again, the lessons learned can be applied to many different scenarios.

During my discussions with research participants, they noted that the insights gained from this period of virtual work can be applied in a variety of ways. For example, one leader at HEI 1 pointed to an employee who had to move because of a change in jobs for her spouse. Under previous regulations, this employee would have left her job to make the move; however, through the experience of the virtual work period, the leader realized that this employee could complete her duties while working from a distance. Maintaining this employee allowed the
organization to retain the institutional knowledge of the worker and ensured the smooth operation of the department. Similarly, a leader at HEI 2 pointed to a worker who would have previously had to leave employment to complete an internship to finish her degree. The ability to adjust job hours and allow the employee to complete her work virtually allowed the organization to keep a proven, effective worker while also investing in the employee, thus creating a win for both parties.

A final lessons learned from this study is in the value of maintaining processes that allow for easy transition. Many institutions pointed out the challenge of not being paperless when the move to virtual work environments took place. This difficulty resulted in stress and changes that would not have been necessary had the organization had paperless processes in place. While flexibility is important, as is shown in the ability to maintain workers even when they are not physically present, resilience is equally important to support workers as they face the uncertainty of the changing environment of work. For example, in 2021 college campuses across the United States have been forced to close because of weather events, security threats, and civil unrest. With the ability to implement virtual work, these institutions may be able to maintain productivity and continue offering services to their customers, the student body.

Summary of Application to Professional Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted services at colleges and universities across the world. Through the insights gained from this research study, it may be possible to turn the challenges experienced by the leaders at institutions such as the participant schools into positives. First and foremost, the importance of the leader’s impact on their organization cannot be overstated. It is from the leader that the tone of success or failure is set for the institution. It is this person to whom workers look for guidance and reassurance in difficult times. From these leaders, valuable
lessons may be learned. By developing strategic plans that allow for flexibility, organizations may be able to meet the needs of their workers more easily. As a result of this flexibility, it is possible for organizations to extend relationships with workers who would not have been able to continue employment for a variety of reasons, including illness and changes in living situations.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

The findings of this study along with the conversations that took place with the organizational leaders during the field research have opened up a well of opportunities for additional research. First, it would be highly beneficial to expand the research by reaching out to institutional leaders across the United States to determine if these challenges are representative of the larger group. Additionally, many leaders who participated in this study discussed the strain of moving to virtual work environments and then addressing the return to work. Several of the interviewees discussed the difficulty they had with workers resigning once they returned to campus, many stating it was a result of emotional fatigue or the desire to remain remote. While this topic was beyond the scope of this research, it appears to be a phenomenon many organizations are experiencing.

**Reflections**

The decision to begin a doctoral program is one that should not be made without great thought and reflection because the process is not an easy one, and challenges will always arise that make the candidate rethink the decision. Upon approaching the conclusion of this process, it is important for me to reflect on the journey once again and how it has benefitted, shaped, and changed me.
**Personal & Professional Growth**

This research study was my most difficult academic journey ever. Through this experience, I was challenged and molded in a way that may never be changed. In all honesty, the first dissertation course was relatively easy, due in part to the excellent preparation provided by the instructor of the research concept course. However, after that course, I began what I reflect on as my “hero’s journey,” a common tool used in mythic storytelling that includes the steps taken by a story’s hero (Hobscheid, 2021). For me, the steps began with the literature review. This was a topic with which I struggled in all my prior classes, and the dissertation was no different. However, with the support of my chair, I was able to slay my windmills (a la Don Quixote), as I told my chair one week, late into the term. Although it was a challenge of epic academic proportions, I was able to complete the task. After that challenge, nothing seemed impossible for me as far as the dissertation was concerned. And, while there were challenges, I persisted, completed the tasks, and showed myself that I could.

Completing this dissertation, and by extension, the doctoral program enables me to move to new levels as a professional. Already, I am teaching at the undergraduate level, but this degree and the knowledge gained along with it will allow me to teach at higher levels and in more classes. Beyond that, this process has given me new insights that I has been able to share with students in my classes on leadership, management, and strategic planning. There were professional challenges along the way, as I worked many days of long hours with various task forces at my current employer. However, I was blessed to work with individuals who not only supported my goals, but also encouraged me, offered introductions, and shared my research ideas with those they thought could assist. From these individuals, I gained many great insights into the true heart of a leader.
**Biblical Perspective**

The Bible (*New International Bible*, 1978/2011) speaks in so many ways to the importance of leaders and of leadership skills. First Timothy 3:1 points out, “Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.” Choosing to be a leader is a noble decision, but also one that comes with many expectations and requirements. In Jeremiah 23:2, leaders who do not care for the children of God are warned, “‘Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,’ declares the Lord.” This verse presents a daunting challenge to organizational leaders. When the leaders in this study were interviewed, the characteristics that leaders described as most effective in managing their workers and the attributes that they were most responsive to as workers were supportive behaviors. Those leaders who reached out to employees, simply to check on them, the ones who gave opportunities to vent and created opportunities for workers to socialize, even remotely, were the same ones who felt that the transition was easily navigated. These leaders exemplified the idea of the servant leader described in Matthew 20:26, when Jesus said:

> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

This stands in stark contrast to the authoritarian leaders described in Matthew 20:25, who lord their power over the heads of their followers. Indeed, at no time did any leader in this study describe or discuss a form of successful leadership that was focused on power during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Humanity is expected to work. This concept is present from the very first verses of the Bible in discussing creation and the work completed by God himself. As beings created in his image, it is natural that mankind works (Keller, 2012). March 2020 saw a period where the ability of man to work faced significant challenges. Without work, people faced challenges not only financially, but also emotionally, psychologically, and in many other areas of their lives. As Keller explained, “Work is as much a basic human need as food, beauty, rest, friendship, prayer, and sexuality; it is not simply medicine but food for our soul. Without meaningful work we sense significant inner loss and emptiness” (p. 36). Because of the pandemic, workers in higher education institutions could have been placed in precarious positions where their financial needs were threatened and other needs were not met. However, because of the efforts of their institutions, much of this workforce was able to shift quickly to virtual work environments, and according to the results of this study, many leaders found that their workers were rather successful in embracing the new working environment.
Summary of Reflections

Jeremiah 29:11-14 states:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord. (New International Bible, 1978/2011)

This verse has been my guiding light since 2009, when job loss in response to the financial collapse left me without my own plan. Since that time, I have followed God’s plan, and as this dissertation comes to a close, I now turn to the letter to the Philippians from Paul the Apostle, where he said, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, Philippians 1:6).

The reflection presented in the previous section described my personal journey through this research study. There were times that it was easier, and times where giants had to be slain. However, the lessons that I learned about myself and about the powerful role of a leader in an organization are those which I will take with me along my many other journeys. God has commanded the leader to watch over his flock and that to be effective, one must first wish to serve. These are the attributes present in the leaders who described serving their workers as they faced the challenges and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary of Section 3

In Section 3, readers were provided with a detailed review of the findings of the study. The findings supported the anticipated themes as well as highlighting themes that were not initially expected. These discovered themes included:
1. Supportive leaders are vital to employee success in crisis periods.

2. In virtual environments, employees need effective communication.

3. Positive perception is based on institution planning, supportive leadership, and change management.

4. Employees want to be heard.

In this section, I addressed how the field study answered each of the research questions. Additionally, Section 3 explained to readers the impact that this research study will have on business practices and ways that the lessons learned may be implemented in a variety of situations. It also identified areas where the research could be extended and furthered. In this section, I also reflected on the dissertation experience and how it impacted me both personally and professionally. Finally, Section 3 closed with a reflection on the biblical perspective of this research study, recognizing that people were created in the image of their Maker and that leaders are commanded to care for His flock. This is especially true when the flock looks to their leaders for significance and meaning during periods of crisis.
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Appendix A: Informed Consent

Title of the Project: Going Virtual: Addressing the Challenges Faced by Organizational Leaders When Employees Transition to Virtual Environments in Times of Crisis
Principal Investigator: Mary S. Johnson, Doctoral Candidate, Doctor of Business Administration, Liberty University Overton Graduate School of Business

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Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must serve in a supervisory role at a private, not-for-profit college or university in the Southeast United States that grants, at a minimum, bachelor’s degrees. Participants should serve in a supervisory capacity where they manage a minimum of one employee. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

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What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges faced by organizational leaders of private higher educational institutions who may have experienced diminished organizational performance as a result of the need to move quickly to virtual work environments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will further explore methods available to these leaders to potentially increase the engagement and productivity of these newly remote workers.

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What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded, online interview that should take between 30 to 60 minutes and be conducted using video teleconferencing software such as Zoom. The interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.
2. As part of this interview, participants may be asked if employee satisfaction surveys or other reports were generated in response to the transition to virtual work environments. If their institution has created such documents, the researcher may request access to the resulting reports with any identifying information removed. It is solely at the discretion of the organization as to whether they provide such documentation, and failure to provide reports or documents will not result in the institution being excluded from this study.
3. Review your interview transcript, which should take no longer than 30 minutes and will cover the accuracy of the transcript as well as the initial findings of the researcher.

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How could you or others benefit from this study?
Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include an increase in the body of knowledge related to the challenges organizational leaders faced when attempting to manage and engage workers who rapidly moved to virtual work environments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which potentially impacted their organization’s overall productivity.
What risks might you experience from being in this study?
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?
The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of randomly generated codes. The list of participants and their assigned code will be kept separate from the data.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer owned by the researcher and within password protected files. Should I have any paper data, it will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and paper copies will be shredded.
- Interviews will be audio and video recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored in password protected files on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?
Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. A printed copy of the completed dissertation will be made available to the library of any school that chooses to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study Mary S. Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [contact information]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Katherine Hyatt, at [contact information].
**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, [redacted], or email at [redacted].

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date
Appendix B: Interview Guide

Time and duration of the interview:
Date: Institution:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

Research Questions:
RQ1: What challenges do leaders in higher educational institutions face when moving to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?
   RQ1a: What can leaders do to overcome these challenges?
   RQ1b: In what ways can these leaders adapt to challenges to successfully transition?
RQ2: How does working in a virtual environment differ from a traditional brick and mortar institution?
RQ3: How does staff engagement impact the organizational performance of a higher educational institution after quickly transitioning to a virtual environment during periods of crisis?

Opening Statement:

I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study to examine the challenges facing leaders of higher education organizations in the Southeast United States regarding managing and engaging workers who quickly pivoted to remote work environments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your participation and insights are a key aspect of understanding the experience of yourself and others during this period. This interview will take between 30 minutes and one hour. At a later date, I will conduct a follow-up meeting with you to allow you to review the transcript of our conversation as well as an emerging themes from the research to ensure the accuracy of the data. I will be recording the interview in order to create a verbatim transcript for data analysis. I will not disclose personal or organizational information during this research study or in its published form. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with me or my institution.
Interview Questions:

1. Could you please tell me your highest degree completed?
2. In what field did you complete your degree?
3. Do you currently serve in a supervisory or leadership role at your institution?
4. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, what was your institution’s response?
   a. At what point during the pandemic did your institution move to virtual operations?
   b. For how long did you operate under this model?
5. When making decisions for your institution or department, was this done with the guidance of medical professionals and risk managers, or was it the responsibility of a single person?
   a. If this was guided by a group, what was the general makeup of that group?
6. Did you conduct virtual check-ins with employees during this period?
   a. Was technical support available to employees as they transitioned to a virtual working environment?
      i. Did you have the resources available to provide workers with the necessary hardware and software to complete their tasks from home?
   b. Were other support measures put into place to support these workers?
      i. Could include flexible work time, emotional support, etc.
   c. Were there organized opportunities for employees to interact socially while they worked remotely?
7. Are there specific challenges that you noted early on in response to this shift to remote work?
8. Are there ways that your organization worked to meet the changing needs of employees during this time?

9. Looking back, is there anything that you would change about how your institution handled its response to moving operations online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

10. Did your organization complete any evaluations or assessments (surveys, white papers, research studies) into its response to the pandemic?
   a. Did you conduct employee satisfaction questionnaires or surveys regarding their evaluation of how the pandemic response was handled?
   b. May I have access to this information?

11. Is there anything else that you would add or that you believe would be of value in understanding your experience?

Closing Statement:

Again, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Your insights into your experience as a leader during a crisis period will be valuable in my research. I appreciate your willingness to share with me.