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Leaders who care: Exploring empathy as an essential trait in 21st century corporate leadership

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Leaders Who Care: Exploring Empathy as an Essential Trait in 21st Century Corporate

Leadership

by

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Dedication

This Master's Thesis is dedicated to my parents, Bill and Mary Sue, who have financially and emotionally supported my entire college education. They have pushed me to reach my fullest potential and continue to inspire me daily. They have instilled in me honorable and spiritual values on life, love, relationships, and leadership. Particularly, I would like to thank my father for his patience and continuous guidance on avenues for exploration throughout this year-long endeavor. As a retired leader in his field, a large amount of my inspiration for this Thesis stemmed from his personal philosophies, experiences, and the example he has set in leadership. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for your unwavering love and support. I couldn't have done it without you.

Abstract

In a field dominated by eclectic leadership styles, leaders have the capacity to influence worker experiences and organizational outcomes. This study examines particular leadership traits that may influence the overall organizational environment. Specifically, the study proposes that empathy is significant for effective leadership. Eighteen leaders in various industries participated in semi-structured interviews regarding their practices and perspectives. The results delineate a compilation of emergent themes as well as data findings regarding specific areas of inquiry. Five major categories were found regarding empathy as an aspect of 21st century leadership: industry-based perspectives, generational demographics, technology, employees as *people* first and *workers* second, and the link between empathy and productivity. Additionally, four major categories were found in regards to how empathy is established in organizational culture: training programs/workshops, organizational success measures, daily communication habits/interaction, and work activities/traditions. The results indicate that empathy is an essential trait for 21st century leadership and beyond.

Table of Contents

Introduction

On October 30, 2013, the Business Leaders for Michigan held a CEO Summit at the Westin Book Cadillac Hotel in Detroit. High level executives shared and discussed a common theme that talent—the people—is the biggest strategic advantage for organizations, and they emphasized that members need to be given a good reason to stay with their organizations. Leaders can play a crucial role in the attitudes (Lester & Brower, 2003; Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008), preferences and perceptions (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Lester & Brower, 2003; Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Weinberger, 2009; Czech & Forward, 2010), job experiences and performance of organizational members (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson; McDonald, 2008; Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2011). Progressive executives highlighted the message that leaders can influence the bottom line by attracting, developing, and retaining organizational talent. How, then, can this be achieved? According to the salient research on leadership, some scholars suggest that, one way is through leadership qualities such as emotional intelligence (Megerian & Sosik, 1997; Carmeli, 2003; Weinberger, 2009; Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2011), and particularly, empathetic leadership (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005; Choi, 2006; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010; Holt & Marques, 2012).

Individuals often claim to have positive or negative work experiences based on their relational connection with leaders, such as how well leaders consider and respect their feelings and ideas. While the study of leadership is vast and research on emotional skills in leadership (i.e., emotional intelligence) continues to grow, the constant flux of organizational environments deems it necessary to habitually study organizational leadership. Perhaps individuals wonder why *work* often feels like a chore rather than a desirable career, or why their work experiences

1

are incongruent with their goals and desires toward work. Workers' very corporate experiences may ultimately be influenced by their leaders and their execution of particular traits and skills. And perhaps leaders ponder how they can facilitate positive worker attitudes, thus aiding in task-orientation and improving organizational outcomes. In fact, Holt and Marques (2012) argue "the topic of leadership has become even more appealing, not so much anymore as a theory, but rather a pragmatic need toward improvement of the quality of an ever increasing pace and complexity of life" (p. 97). While much research has examined the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) among leaders, fewer studies have considered how one specific aspect of EI, empathy, could potentially influence the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of subordinates.

Literature Review

This literature review discusses the extant research on empathy and leadership and makes the argument that empathy is an essential trait for effective leadership. The review begins with a definition and explanation of empathy as an interpersonal skill and component of relation-oriented leadership. The background on empathy and leadership will then be highlighted, setting up the claim that empathy is crucial in today's leadership. Thereafter, the following sections will highlight the need for comfortable relationships and connection in the workplace, workers preferences for and perceptions of leaders, the positive effects of empathy in the workplace and how the lack of empathy can lead to negative organizational effects. Furthermore, the need for education on empathy and an explanation of how empathy contributes to leadership emergence is discussed. Finally, the claim for empathetic leadership will set up the primary research questions and highlight the qualitative method of analysis for the current study.

Defining Empathy as an Interpersonal Skill and a Component of Relations-oriented Leaders

To understand why empathy is important to organizational success it is first important to know the meaning of empathy. Empathy is defined in similar ways by numerous scholars with overarching themes such as the ability and desire to understand one's feelings, re-experience such feelings, and provide emotional support (Megerian & Sosik, 1997; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Woff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006; Czech & Forward, 2010; Jin, 2010; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010; Holt & Marques, 2012). Empathy is an interpersonal skill which varies from one person to another (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002) and facilitates in the development of a cooperative and trusting relationships (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Katz (1963) explained empathy as the ability to take on the experience of the other, as if one is in fact the other person. This is similar to the old adage of *walk a mile in his/her shoes*, which Czech and Forward (2010) describe as the *heart* of empathy. Megerian and Sosik (1997) label such emotional abilities as "affairs of the heart" (p. 32). It is a kind of inner radar, where a person becomes personally involved by mimicking the other person and conveys "reassurance, recognition, and acceptance" (Kellet, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006, p. 147). For decades, comprehensive research in psychology, teaching, and parenting has posited the importance of empathy in personal relationships—it is a social skill that involves listening, consideration, and supportive behaviors, which play a key role in managing relationships (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002). Most people generally want to be understood, and empathy allows individuals to send that message to their peers (Czech & Forward). Since it has been carefully examined for its significance in interpersonal relationships, it can be argued that empathy is crucial for effective leadership, especially since the workplace is laden with multiple relationships. Furthermore, leadership by definition embraces a relational aspect, because, after all, leaders lead *people*. Leaders inspire. They transform. They engage. While numerous

3

researchers have defined leadership in various ways based on the myriad of *types* of leadership or particular leadership styles, the relational element indicative of leaders is generally an overarching theme in defining leadership. Various scholars advocate that the ability to uphold positive relations with employees is an essential characteristic for effective leadership (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007). Therefore, because the workplace is a source of multiple relationships, employing effective interpersonal skills such as empathy is important for effective leadership.

Empathy builds on self-awareness. Empathy involves thinking *and* feeling, rather than solely expressing emotion. And, the ability to first recognize one's emotions, and to further identify with one's emotions, is both innate as well as learned. "The more in tune one is with his or her own feelings, the better one is at reading the feelings of others" (Megerian & Sosik, 1996, p. 36). However, while one may have a high characteristic of considerate behaviors, it does not necessarily mean he or she is able to experience another's emotions (Kellet, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002), which is why it is a skill that varies from one person to another and a skill that can be further developed with experience—and perhaps a little bit of effort. As stated earlier in the definition of empathy, individuals who display empathy have the ability and *desire* to feel the emotions of others. When individuals truly make an effort to experience others' emotions, their peers will most likely feel appreciated and accepted, creating the probability of a successful, trusting relationship.

Empathy has been cited as a central, defining feature of emotional intelligence (Carmeli, 2003; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Choi, 2006; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006; Miller, Considine, & Garner, 2007; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Jin (2010) wrote that empathy is the core emotional trait for leadership

competence. As a communicative skill, empathy has the potential to largely influence the organizational environment.   Czech and Forward (2010) stated that communication constitutes the "make or break" skill among leaders (p. 435). As a particular trait among leaders, empathy is a component of relations-oriented leadership. Leaders generally adopt two predominant routes for leadership that influence both worker perceptions of their leaders as well as job outcomes. These routes are task-oriented leadership, where leaders focus their behaviors on specific tasks and productivity, and relations-oriented leadership, where leaders focus on the socio-emotional behaviors intended to create quality relationships, such as building trust and loyalty, practicing good listening, understanding concerns, and providing support and encouragement (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006). Empathy, then, is a component of relations-oriented behaviors. When leaders focus on the feelings and needs of their subordinates rather than the sole task and outcomes, good things generally happen. "In the new work dynamic, 'job-centered' leadership is being replaced by 'worker-centered' leadership, which has the potential to drastically alter the role of an effective leader" (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000, p. 19). While empathy is a relations-oriented behavior, Wolf, Pescosolido, and Druskat (2002) posit that empathy can also contribute to the cognitive skills necessary for task leadership. Foundationally, early scholars like Blake & Mouton (1964) stressed the importance of relationship skills for effective leadership. According to their managerial grid theory (1964), leadership effectiveness is best achieved when leaders are partial to concerns for *both* production and people. In what they identify as the 9, 9 orientation to management, Blake and Mouton assert that the most effective leaders are those who equally center their leadership toward production and people. "Packaged as a humans relations training laboratory, the managerial grid has been adopted extensively by several major industrial

5

organizations to improve interpersonal effectiveness and develop leadership skills" (Bernardin &

Alvares, 1976, p. 84).   Moreover, Rensis Likert (1961) developed a management system that

identified four management styles of leaders: exploitative authoritative, benevolent authoritative,

consultative system, and participative system. According to Likert, the most effective form of

management is through a participative system, where supervisors motivate employees through

equal participation, giving them high levels of responsibility and accountability. A participative

system allows for the formation of genuine relationship because employees feel comfortable as

equal contributors in the work environment. With this style, Likert argues that employees are

most satisfied. Therefore, based on historical claims, relations-oriented behaviors are essential

for positive outcomes for work relationships as well as job functionality. However, while

historical foundations for effective leadership have been established, leaders' have not

consistently adopted relations-oriented leadership styles. Since empathy is a major component

of relations-oriented behaviors, the remainder of this literature review will therefore discuss the

present research on empathetic leadership and argue for the need for empathy in today's leaders.

Particularly, the review will ultimately show that a leader with high empathy can produce

positive perceptions and satisfaction among members and thereby influence the bottom line of

organizations.

Background on Empathy and Leadership: A Call for Empathy in Today's Leaders

Research on empathy and leadership dates back to 1954 (Bell & Hall Jr.), but only of late

has the scholarship gained its worthy attention in the salient research on organizational

leadership. Although various leadership styles and organizational topics have been extensively

studied, the role of emotions earned little recognition in the literature on leadership, and it was

not until the late nineties and the onset of the 21st century that emotions such as empathy

accelerated in leadership research (Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Miller, Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006; Considine, & Garner, 2007). Contrary to early theories on the key elements of leadership, such as authority or dominance, Holt and Marques (2012) suggest that "the 21st century brings a whole new set of demands, which radically change the way leaders will perform" (p. 97). Others would agree that, while cognitive abilities such as expertise and problem solving are antecedents to effective leadership, emotional abilities—or social skills—are equally as significant for today's leaders and can often determine who will and who will not be successful (Carmeli, 2003; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Boatwright & Forrest, 2000). Holt and Marques propose that there is something wrong with today's corporate world—that its individualistic leaders possess little empathy or inter-human skills. "While there is general consensus about qualities such as intelligence, charisma, responsibility, vision, and passion, there are some 'softer,' more emotion driven skills, such as compassion and empathy, that have not been widely accepted as befitting of leadership execution" (p. 96).   Humans are hardwired to connect to others, and McDonald (2008) asserts we are in an era where the *nicest* leaders will be most successful and that "'soft' behaviors lead to hard results" (qtd. in Holt & Marques, p. 103). Furthermore, Miller (2009) points out that leadership behavior requires a "vital ingredient," which is the willingness of the leader to implement particular behaviors (p. 45). In light of many ethical disasters in today's contemporary corporate working world, companies are now more than ever seeking empathetic leaders to run organizations and generate positive outcomes (Holt & Marques). Good leadership is essential to manage the continuous change and turmoil that often takes place in organizations. Vaill (1996) termed such change and turmoil as "permanent white waters" (qtd. in Weinberger, 2009, p. 10). Whilst not denying the potential for ethical disasters to occur in organizations with *any* type of leader, empathetic behavior may be a good

starting point for leaders in helping to tame the organizational white waters from ethical disasters, turmoil, frustration, emotional turbulence, and many more.

A variety of skills, behaviors, and personal qualities have been studied for their effects on successful leadership. Many scholars have discussed successful leadership styles and behaviors conducive to positive organizational outcomes and successful work relationships. Empathy has been cited as a key component among several particularly desirable—and often effective—leadership styles such as charismatic leadership (Choi, 2006), transformational leadership (Megerian & Sosik, 1996; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Butler & Chinowski, 2006; Rubin, Munz & Bommer, 2005; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006; Miller, 2009; Jin, 2010), and leader-member exchange (LMX) (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Regarding these particular styles, Miller (2009) states that employing empathy in leadership behavior is a dimension deliberately exercised by individuals with transformational leadership styles—a highly effective leadership style based upon establishing a vision and empowering organizational members in reaching a common goal through inspiring, motivating, recognizing strengths and weaknesses, and "building good rapport" and "creating personal connections with employees" (Jin, 2010, p. 161). For example, in a study on public relations leaders with a preferred style of transformational leadership, empathy was found to be a significant factor in decision-making, influencing optimism and managing frustration of employees (Jin, 2010). Therefore, while some individuals deliberately and conscientiously exercise empathy in their leadership roles, other leaders' emotional skills may be more subtle. Regardless of the manner in which they are applied, empathic behaviors have been shown to not only be promoted by some leaders, but can also generate a positive impact on the daily goings-on of the work environment.

Regarding this notion of the cognizance in the practice of empathic behaviors, Miller (2009) further advocates for an attention on *love* in leadership. Based on a dimension of the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ), Miller compares empathy to love, which the TLQ delineates as "'empathy with action'" (p. 46). Miller bases her premise about love on the notion that—for spiritual individuals—our work-lives should be congruent with our faith-based lives, and this, it appears, is certainly not the way conformist society has trended in the last few decades. Miller writes:

> For those of us who seek to incorporate our faith life within our work life,
> the mandate to love as an action, as 'empathy with action' is not an optional extra.
> We are commanded to do so. As such, we bring transformation to our world. (p.
> 57)

In addition to the fact that empathy has become a key component of particular styles such as transformational leadership, empathy is, as stated in the definition of empathy, a central feature of emotional intelligence—a skill claimed to be a key factor crucial in the success of organizational leaders (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Carmeli, 2003; Choi; 2006; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006; Weinberger, 2009; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Carmeli wrote that "emotional intelligence may significantly diminish employees' withdrawal intensions because of the ability to better regulate emotions" (p. 796). Therefore, empathy has promising potential to positively impact subordinates' attitudes, experiences, as well as organizational outcomes.

Workplace Relationships and the Need for Connection

As an environment in which individuals spend most of their time—often more so than at home—the workplace is rich with multiple interpersonal relationships, and leaders are likely

required to display relations-oriented behaviors. The quality of organizational relationships has the potential to elicit positive or negative work experiences. Because empathy is an interpersonal skill which contributes to positive relationships, empathetic leaders can create an environment of trust and support. Workers have a need for connection among their leaders, which suggests the importance of relational and social skills in leadership. "Meaningful and empowering relationships may be an important goal for leaders interested in meeting the needs [of their workers]" (Boatwright & Forrest, p. 30). Further support by Cooper and Sawaf (1997) emphasizes that "emotional relationships are the lifeblood of any business" (p. 51). Empathy allows leaders to establish positive relationships because the mutual experience of emotions creates a bond among individuals (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Jin, 2010). Stemming from implications of LMX theory—where leaders provide desirable assignments and rewards to their in-group subordinates, and those subordinates are committed and loyal in return—leaders who develop quality relationships with their subordinates will likely be effective leaders (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Their skills, values, and consequent behaviors are crucial for developing favorable relationships (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Moreover, because the workplace consists of numerous social relationships and because emotions are an integral part of our social lives, emotions are salient in the workplace. In fact, Miller, Considine and Garner (2007) identified five types of organizational emotion, many of which encompass or engender compassionate or empathetic interactions with clients or coworkers. Two particular types of emotion they identify are emotion *with* work and emotion *at* work. Both include emotions that arise among interactions with co-workers. More specifically, emotion *at* work is seen when employees experience stressors or conflicts from other life roles. Waldron (2000) argued that "relationships with coworkers influence our emotions more than the things we do at work" and

10

that "workplace relationships are natural breeding grounds for both ordinary emotional experiences and more extreme experiences" (in Miller, Considine, & Garner, 2007, p. 236-237). Thus, social support and empathetic leadership are essential to support such workplace relationships (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Jin, 2010). The feelings that subordinates express at work could stem from several organizational experiences or interactions, as well as outside experiences from other life roles, so it is clear that leaders with empathetic concern and behaviors may elicit a more positive atmosphere among their coworkers. When leaders can recognize these types of emotions in their subordinates and attempt to understand their day-to-day experiences on a close, personal level with social support, they will likely achieve ideal relationships with the connection, or bond, necessary for interpersonal organizational relationships.

Workers' Preferences for, and Perceptions of, Leadership

Because the nature of relationships among leaders and subordinates has such a large potential for influencing work experiences, subordinates generally have their own particular preferences for qualities and behaviors among their leaders. Every worker has their own subjective views and preferences for leaders, and while there are many determining factors in perceived leader effectiveness such as expertise, education level, gender, competency, problem solving, etc. (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002), workers also prefer leaders who are understanding and caring (Kellett, Humprey, & Sleeth, 2002). However, it is not uncommon for leaders to possess qualities and partake in behaviors opposite those desired by their subordinates. Boatwright and Forrest (2000) have described the incongruence among employees' desires for *ideal* leadership and their actual leaders' behaviors:

11

Over a decade ago, researchers found that frequently a worker's 'ideal' leader is

significantly different from their actual leader and the congruence between a

worker's *ideal* leadership behavior preference and his or her *actual* leader's

behavior influences work satisfaction… (p. 19)

It is therefore crucial for leaders to display desirable qualities and behaviors among their

subordinates. Moreover, because employees are the talent and the foundation of the

organization—who are the product of creativity and innovation (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, &

Kramer, 2004)— it is largely the responsibility of leaders to keep them happy and motivate their

daily actions.

While workers have preferences for leaders, and while leaders may in fact match such

preferences, the success of leaders can be largely determined by their subordinates' perceptions.

While a leader may have all the appropriate and desired qualities, subordinates may or may not

perceive them as such. This suggests that specific behaviors by leaders are crucial. Based on

studies of perceived leader support (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004) and perceived

felt trustworthiness (Lester & Brower, 2003), leadership effectiveness is often based on

subordinates' perceptions; thus, leaders must show their concern for their employees in their

direct behaviors. While many studies often utilize self reports of leaders, it is worker perceptions

of their leaders that best indicate the effectiveness of the leader (Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2011).

Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth (2006) found that individuals with high empathetic traits and

considerate behaviors are perceived by their peers to have high attributions of leadership. They

wrote that "behavior that conveys empathy and other emotional abilities cues a leadership

prototype in the minds of observers… people become effective leaders only after others perceive

them as leaders…we will respond to others as leaders if their displays of empathy first make us

12

feel understood and valued as individuals" (p. 150).   Moreover, Miller (2009) found that

Leaders who are rated high by employees and colleagues for showing a "genuine concern for

others" are also perceived to be effective in leading the organization (p. 49).   It was earlier

mentioned that while some leaders may have empathetic characteristics like consideration and

support, they may not necessarily elicit empathy through their actions.   Kellett, Humphrey and

Sleeth describe this as interactive versus passive empathy.   A leader may have high attributions

of empathy, but may fail to express it, which may cause subordinates to perceive the leadership

style as unsuccessful.   Keeping in mind the impact of subordinates' perceptions, it is thus

imperative that leaders create an emotional tie with individuals by communicating emotion.

Subordinates then need to be able to perceive the empathetic concern as well as feel its impact.

Only bonds can be created by those who feel it.

Positive Effects of Empathetic Leadership

While each subordinate may perceive their leaders in different ways, many other scholars

have uncovered some positive organizational effects where leaders display empathetic behaviors.

Leader behaviors not only influence subordinates' perceptions of said leader, but the leaders'

behaviors also influence subordinates' perceptions of themselves regarding their degree of self-

confidence, competence, and the value they put on their jobs (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, &

Kramer, 2004).   Self-perceptions of subordinates have a causal effect on their evaluations,

experiences, attitudes, and overall experiences and performance (Lester & Brower, 2003;

McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Kellet, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006).   Amabile, Schatzel,

Moneta and Kramer support the notion that leader-to-subordinate behaviors can generate

particular effects on performance.   "Leaders who wish to support high-level performance must

pay careful attention to the details of their own everyday—and seemingly mundane—behavior

toward subordinates" (p. 30). Furthermore, Weinberger (2009) wrote that "it is those emotional, value-based aspects of leadership that are believed to influence the achievements of groups and organizations" (p. 10). Employees' perceptions of their leaders not only have a direct effect on their attitudes but also indirectly influence their task engagement and job satisfaction (Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2011). For example, Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer found that when employees perceive that their leaders trust and support them, their creativity and job satisfaction are enhanced:

> Of all the forces that impinge on people's daily experience of the work
> environment in these organizations, one of the most immediate and potent is
> likely to be the leadership of these teams—those local leaders—who direct and
> evaluate their work, facilitate or impede their access to resources and information,
> and in a myriad of other ways touch their engagement with tasks and other
> people. (p. 6)

Additionally, Choi (2006) noticed that, because empathetic leaders understand their followers' needs and pay attention to their desires as well as include them in decision making, leader empathy is a motivational catalyst among subordinates. Subordinates are therefore encouraged to work more effectively and efficiently, are more optimistic and enthusiastic about their work roles, their frustration levels are reduced (McColl-Kennnedy, & Anderson, 2002; Jin, 2010), and commitment to leaders and the mission of the organization may also be enhanced (Choi, 2006). In an article on public relations leaders and a transformational style of leadership, empathy was recognized as the most important emotion for leaders which enabled them to "bring more confidence among employees" (Jin, p. 175). Additionally, in a study on empathy and leadership behaviors of health managers, Skinner and Spurgeon (2005) found that empathetic behaviors of

health leaders were positively related to transformational behaviors of followers. Specifically, they found that three dispositions of empathy employed by leaders—namely empathetic concern, perspective taking, and empathetic matching—inspired followers to go beyond their normal call of duty. This supports the notion that empathetic behavior may yield further task production. Empathy allows leaders to be more in tune to the needs of their followers (Jin, 2010) by detecting both positive and negative feelings (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010) and in turn allows leaders to make decisions for the good of the group, perform well in problem solving circumstances, and take progressive action for the team (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Wolff, Pescosolido, & DRuskat, 2002). Therefore, it is obvious that particular emotional behaviors by leaders have a major impact on many organizational aspects regarding subjective attitudes and experiences as well as overall organizational outputs.

Lack of Empathy: Negative Organizational Effects

While numerous positive effects of empathetic leadership have been cited by scholars, it is also crucial to examine and investigate the outcomes of organizations that lack empathetic leaders, especially since some subordinates prefer leaders with more task-oriented behaviors over relations-oriented behaviors. Although task-oriented behaviors may be highly conducive to organizational productivity and desirable outcomes, they may only be effective insofar as temporary task-engagement, and without the supplementation of relations-oriented behaviors such as empathy, subordinates may begin to feel like robots that are only appreciated for their dutiful skills (Goleman, Boyatzis & Mckee, 2002; Clarke, 2005; Holt & Marques, 2012). Eventually, a strict focus on solely task production may cause burnout and a sense that leaders are apathetic about the emotional needs and concerns of their subordinates.

15

Although deemed important by many scholars, empathy is often a trait that is missing or lacking worthy recognition among leaders in the business or corporate spheres as well as in business education settings. For example, in a study conducted by Holt and Marques (2012), business students rated, in order of importance, the ten most important qualities for effective leadership, and empathy consistently ranked as the least important leadership trait among these students' perceptions. Intrigued by these results, Holt and Marques conducted a follow up study and found that students and business professionals alike perceive empathy to either be a sign of weakness, an instable quality, or something that may interfere with decision making. Other factors also include a lack of their own personal empathy which contributed to their perceptions on leadership.   Babiak (1995) adopted the psychological term, *psychopaths*, and suggested that business leaders who lack empathy are corporate psychopaths.   These corporate psychopaths commonly possess characteristics of high self-centeredness, manipulation, narcissism, greediness, and guilt-deprivations. While a label like *psychopath* may not seem to be the obvious term to describe non-empathetic leaders, it is also fitting regarding the same types of characteristics commonly found among actual psychopaths and further emphasizes the grave importance of empathetic leaders.

When leaders dismiss the importance of empathy in the workplace, organizations may experience some detrimental turns. Holt and Marques (2012) elaborated on the notion of such corporate psychopaths, who wittingly and artistically explained how leaders without empathy can negatively influence an organization:

> A phenomenon beyond everyday workplace politics, these psychopaths in suits cunningly transform the organizational environment into an arena where useful targets are meticulously identified and cultivated, influential victims astutely

controlled, and useless ones smartly abandoned in a well-developed system of

hiring, promoting, succeeding and firing…Since they are not the nurturing kind,

they alienate devoted employees and jeopardize the company's chances on proper

succession and long-term well-being. (p. 101-102)

Contrary to empathy, these types of leaders partake in manners that "show little warmth or

caring" which Czech and Forward (2010) labeled as rejection behaviors (p. 441). Furthermore,

organizations with leaders who lack empathy often partake in unethical behaviors, which further

elicit destructive effects on an organization (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2012). Goleman,

Boyatzis and Mckee (2002) also stated that these insensitive leaders often create dissonance

among their coworkers and subordinates, whereas leaders with high empathy create resonance

with their followers which promote positive responses and worker experiences. Clarke (2005)

wrote that followers of insensitive, non-empathetic leaders become victims of grave devastations

who are gradually brought down with the entire organization in which they work. Because

narcissism and self-centeredness are common characteristics of the non-empathetic, corporate

psychopathic leader, Hold and Marques suggest that western cultures, such as the United States,

which reinforce an individualistic mindset, may harbor more of these types of leaders with

dangerous characteristics. Based on these negative effects—particularly considering employee

burnout that may occur, dissonance among leaders and subordinates, and potential organizational

downturns—it therefore continues to be ever more evident that empathy is necessary in today's

secular society among the constant flux of organizations in the dynamics of this 21st century.

The Need for Education on Empathy

Regarding the exalted positive aspects of empathetic leadership and the potential negative

impacts complemented by non-empathetic leaders, how can organizations harvest and ensure an

environment that is copious with empathy and positive, considerate behaviors? While early

leadership scholars assumed that leadership traits were absolute, inherent properties, other

scholars argue that some qualities are not inborn, and thus education on particular psychological

traits such as empathy is crucial for developing successful future leaders, rather than solely

focusing on academic and task skill sets that are often particular to business organizations

(Megerian & Sosik, 1996; Jin, 2010; Holt & Marques, 2012). Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia (2010)

wrote that "management development programs and executive coaching can be used to improve

interpersonal skills such as empathy" (p. 572), and they suggest, like McColl-Kennedy &

Anderson (2002) that empathy should be recognized as a determining factor when organizations

recruit and appoint future leaders. Additionally, Jin (2010) wrote that business and professional

organizations must integrate leadership elements such as "empathy, compassion, sensitivity,

relationship building, and innovation into classrooms and workshops to help prepare leadership

for the future" (p. 174). While some leaders can learn effective traits and behaviors, and while

some are born with raw, natural abilities, there are many others who possess outstanding

leadership skills because of their real life experiences. Allio (2009) identified the big five ideas

which are often captured in the academia on leadership, and two of these ideas are that "good

leaders have good character" and "leaders are self-made—while they can learn theories and

principles, it's usually the experience in real life that makes or breaks leaders" (qtd. in Holt &

Marques, p. 97). And, leaders are cultivated through, and rise from, these real-life experiences

because they spawn the qualities befitted for natural leadership.

How Empathy Contributes to Leadership Emergence

While it is crucial to select the proper leaders in the hiring process, it is important to note

that many individuals earn their position and accreditation as leaders when they naturally

emerge—often based upon inherent qualities, abilities, and life experiences—out of their groups

of co-workers into leadership positions. These individuals are perhaps the leaders that coworkers

look up to and truly appreciate, because these leaders genuinely understand and comprehend the

needs of their coworkers. In fact, in a study that tested a theory of leader emergence in self-

managing teams, Wolff, Pescosolido, and Druskat (2002) found that individuals with empathetic

traits and behaviors were able to better understand the *unstated* needs and feelings of the team

and the individual members, and they thus emerged as the selected team leader in their group.

They claim that empathetic leaders who emerge in small teams are effective for two reasons:

"social situations such as work team environments are laden with emotion" and empathetic

people are "better able to understand and identify the needs of other team members and,

consequently, of the team" (p. 510). It was earlier stated that "behavior that conveys empathy

and other emotional abilities cues a leadership prototype in the minds of observers… people

become effective leaders only after others perceive them a leaders" (Kellett, Humphrey, &

Sleeth, 2006, p. 150). If this is the case, something significant can be said about the success of

individuals who emerge as leaders from the common crowd of subordinates. Perhaps leaders

should be appointed based on their emergent behaviors and the connections they make with their

team members.

Making the Claim for Empathetic Leadership

In an ever-evolving, dynamic society, it is crucial to continue exploration of the most

pragmatic leadership traits and behaviors. The research on empathy and leadership is growing,

but there is still much to discover. Various studies have employed quantitative in discovering

empathy's relationship among several variables, including but not limited to: subordinate

perceptions of their leaders and/or perceived leader effectiveness (Carmeli, 2003; Lester &

Brower, 2003; Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008; Weinberger, 2009; Czech & Forward, 2010), group job satisfaction (Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2011), and worker or organizational performance/outcomes (Kellet, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Carmeli, 2003; Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005; Choi, 2006; Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2011; Carter & Greer, 2013). Few studies, however, were uncovered employing qualitative designs. Fewer yet, were studies uncovered utilizing interviews (Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Fielden & Lindebaum, 2011; Marques, 2013) for the data collection technique. According to Klenke (2008), leadership studies have been historically grounded in quantitative paradigms, especially regarding scientific research on best practices and solutions for problems that emerge in leadership. Nonetheless, leadership as inquiry is still not comprehensively understood. Klenke also acknowledges that, while we know much about leaders, much less is known about particular aspects of leadership. Thus, qualitative methodologies have gained momentum, albeit at a slow rate, in contemporary leadership studies. Klenke affirms the following:

> Although quantitative methods are ideal for testing hypotheses...they are poorly suited to help us understand the meanings leaders and followers ascribe to the significant events in their lives and the success or failure of their organizations. As a result, until fairly recently, qualitative studies in leadership remained relatively rare, especially within North America…However, quantitatively generated leadership descriptors often fail to lead to an understanding of the deeper structures of the phenomena we study. Several authors argue that qualitative studies must play a pivotal role in management and leadership research. The study of leadership is particularly well suited for qualitative analyses because of multidisciplinary nature of the field… (p. 4)

Further qualitative research—particularly through interviews—is therefore necessary in expanding the robust study of leadership regarding the authentic attitudes toward leader empathy and the degree to which empathy is executed in organizations.   I therefore pose two questions as comparative replications and extensions of the salient research on empathy and leadership. Based on the information posed on the positive and negative aspects of empathetic leadership behaviors, it is important to follow-up such studies to determine the most recent attitudes held by contemporary leaders. Moreover, because it has been argued that relations-behaviors like empathy can yield effective task engagement among subordinates, it is important to further explore how leaders appraise the influence that this single trait has on organizational production. Thus, the first research question is as follows:

RQ1: How do today's corporate leaders view empathy as an aspect of their leadership?

Because scholars have recognized that there is a need for education on empathy in organizations, and while it has been argued that empathy is crucial for 21st century leadership, the existing research exploring how empathy is implemented by organizational leaders is deficient. Thus, research question two explores how empathy is carried out in reputable organizations:

RQ2: How is empathy established in practice by today's corporate leaders?

Method

Sampling and Participants

To obtain an appropriate sample for study, participants were recruited through convenient and snowball sampling via email. Leaders were initially recruited from corporations in Southeast Michigan. Snowball sampling, however, allowed me to recruit several other participants from outside the region, the state, and even the country. Specifically, two participants were outside the region—from mid-Michigan and northern Michigan. Two others

were out of state—one relocated to North Dakota, and another resided in Washington, D.C. Finally, another participant was currently stationed across the globe in Europe.

A cross section of different types of industries was necessary for this research endeavor in order to gain multiple perspectives of leaders in different types of corporate organizations. Therefore, individuals holding leadership positions from distinguished organizations across various industries—including power utility, construction, finance and banking, manufacturing, healthcare, and professional services—were asked to participate in audio recorded semi-structured interviews. The purpose of this study was to discover how contemporary leaders view empathy as a significant characteristic for effective leadership and how it is implemented in their organizations. Some criteria for inclusion were: (1) participants must hold at least a middle-level leadership position, and (2) participants must have held said leadership position for at least one year.

Eighteen total individuals—fourteen males and four females—were among the participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to provide anonymity. Current titles of each leader are all of significant stature and are as varied as President, Chief Executive Officer, Chief Project Officer, Director, Marketing Director, etc. of their organizations. On average, the participants held a leadership position for about 25 years; and, collectively, participants held a leadership position for a total of 446 years. Each leader was responsible for a particular number of direct reports as well as a total number of employees supervised. The total number of employees supervised varied in numbers from the 50's, to the 100's, to the 1,000's. Some leaders also had several hundred or thousand contract employees. However, because each leader does not generally meet with total number of employees and/or contract employees each week, I only accounted for direct reports—calculating both average and total numbers.

Therefore, participants were responsible for an average number of about 11 direct reports. Collectively, participants reached a total number of 261 direct reports. One leader had a very large number (n=81) of direct reports compared to other participants, so this number was excluded from calculating the average number of direct reports.

Procedure and Measures

Qualifying participants were asked to partake in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview regarding their leadership attitudes, behaviors, and matters of the organizations in which they lead. As a qualitative design, I completed eighteen interviews. According to Beitin (2012), failed attempts in early qualitative research in predetermining an adequate number for sample size has led to the common approach in reaching "theoretical saturation" (p. 244). The assumptions by qualitative scholars for an optimal number of participants are inconclusive—one researcher (Boyd, 2001) suggests that a small range of two to ten participants is apt, while another (Creswell, 1998) endorses a number of participants up to twenty five. Therefore, contemporary ideologies in the qualitative paradigm aim to discern when common themes transpire throughout analysis.   Consequently, I had hoped to reach such saturation after completing ten to twenty semi-structured interviews, and such saturation had been reached after eighteen leaders were interviewed.

Prior to any specific interview questions, participants were given a brief explanation of the research endeavor. Participants were then asked to sign an informed consent regarding protection of identity and confidentiality. Based on the degree to which each question was elaborated upon, or when follow-up questions had emerged, each interview lasted anywhere from 30-60 minutes. The shortest interview was 27 minutes, and the longest interview was shortly over an hour. While I had a list of 15 specific interview questions, some interviews only

focused on a particular portion of questions for inquiry depending on the direction that the discussions were headed, and if/when stories were told about some specific leaders' experiences; other interviews touched on all the questions; and in several others, I skipped around from one question to another depending upon the relationship of questions and answers. Thus the interviews were semi-structured in nature. Interviews took place at the leaders' place of employment or at a convenient location such as a local coffee shop. When an in-person interview was not feasible, phone interviews were the secondary option. Five of the eighteen interviews took place over the phone, and three of the five phone interviews were with the leaders who were currently located out of the state or the country. A list of the questions utilized in each interview is included in Appendix A.

Interviews and any notes taken by hand during the interview were transcribed and stored in a password protected computer held by the researcher. After the interviews and notes were transcribed, I read through each interview to first make note of any major categories or interesting perspectives by highlighting key points and listing potential themes/findings at the end of each document. After initial analysis, I read through the interviews several times more, considering all highlighted portions and additional notes added to identify any relationships among the categories. Doing so allowed me to create any connections among the categories. Finally, after all categories were listed and grouped together, I identified the most common themes relevant to the purpose of this study. Known as the Constant Comparative Method (CMM) and often used in the qualitative analysis of interviews, (Boeije, 2002), I compared the data from each interview to identify any embedded or emergent themes. Research question one (*how leaders view empathy as an aspect of their leadership*) primarily yielded such themes. Research question two (*how empathy is established in practice*), on the other hand, primarily

focused on inquiring about, and thus identifying, particular leadership practices and traditions as it relates to empathy. For example, several interview questions were specific areas of inquiry— such as training workshops implemented by organizations—that focus on soft skills. Thus, RQ1 reports emergent and implicit themes, while RQ2 primarily reports explicit data findings.

With an abundant choice of data collection techniques in research, it is important to validate the choice made for this research design. Regarding the dominance of quantitative methodologies and paradigms, qualitative methodology is vying for more attention in its potential to yield unique data to the salient research on leadership. Because leadership is contingent in nature and leaders are unique, holding diverse viewpoints and styles, qualitative methodologies are appropriately suited for leadership studies regarding its capacity for yielding a variety of valuable insights.

Whilst not denying the validity of quantitative measures, qualitative analysis in the growing field of leadership studies can also offer individuals a wealth of information for application in their own leadership practices. Therefore, qualitative methods, particularly through semi-structured interview questions, were applied to answer the research questions in this study. Because of their capacity to provide in-depth, practical, authentic, and personal knowledge in the field of study (Beitin, 2012), interviews have been the most commonly used method for data collection in qualitative research (Nunkoosing, 2005; Sandelowski, 2002). Therefore, it is not surprising that, as qualitative methodologies began gaining momentum in the research on leadership, interviews were highly preferred methods of data collection (Klenke, 2008). Hence, the qualitative research designed for this study will add valuable and pragmatic insights to the growing studies on leadership that quantitative measures, such as surveys, may not necessarily yield.

Results pertaining to RQ1

Of the eighteen leaders interviewed for this study, each individual represented highly successful and well-known companies in their line of work. The perspectives discussed by these leaders of their established caliber not only added valuable insights to this study, but, relative to the achievements their companies have made over the years, their leadership practices have arguably proven to be effective. In regards to the specific investigations of this study, the first research question sought to investigate how today's corporate leaders view empathy as an aspect of their leadership. While a few of the leaders interviewed had less affirmative views toward exercising empathy in the workplace, the predominant perspective was that most leaders are recognizing the need for empathetic leadership and the importance of creating a comfortable culture of connection. Moreover, while some leaders stated that empathy was not part of their natural communication or leadership style, they still recognized its importance regarding the overall effect it has on the employees as well as the health of the organization. With this in mind, many leaders have exercised an inherent style, or adapted to a style, that utilizes soft skills in the workplace; while there are others—who still exercise a more traditional style of leadership—who are recognizing the need for soft skills, and are, in some aspects, creating a gradual shift toward a relations route to leadership. In regards to this research question (how leaders view empathy as an aspect of *their* leadership), both emergent themes and specific data findings were identified in the analysis of results. Specifically, five elements in this section are identified: 1) generational demographics of employees, 2) use of technology, 3) industry-based leadership perspectives, 4) employees as people first, and workers second, and 5) the link between empathy and employee productivity.

Because these five distinct elements include emergent themes and specific data findings, it is important to explain their nature. Two major themes emerged, while the other categories were areas of inquiry particularly explored in the interview. The first two categories were specific data findings in regards to an inquiry based upon any recognizable changes in the demands for today's leadership: 1) generational demographics of workers, and 2) use of technology. The third and fourth categories were emergent themes regarding empathy as an aspect of today's leaders: 3) industry-based leadership perspectives, and 4) employees as people first, and workers second. This fourth category, "employees as people first, and workers second" essentially emerged from specific areas of inquiry regarding the capacity to respond to emotional issues and complaints about work. When asked about responding to these emotional issues or complaints about work, the overall theme thus presented itself. Therefore, this theme holds two subsections—responding to personal/emotional issues and responding to complaints about work—as specific data findings. Lastly, regarding the link between relations-oriented leadership and process-oriented leadership outlined in the literature review, I specifically asked how leaders view empathy as a motivational factor in employee productivity/engagement. Therefore, the fifth element in this section is a specific data finding. Explanations of each are elaborated upon in the following sections.

Generational Demographics of employees

One data finding outlined in the ways that leaders view empathy as an aspect of their leadership considered the generational group of their employees. Many leaders have recognized, as well as personally experienced, the shift from traditional, process-oriented, leadership styles toward the practice of relations-oriented skills. Much of this shift has been credited to the demographics of employees in today's workplace. "There is a vast difference between

Generation X and Generation Y individuals. The younger generation functions much differently than the older generation," explained Lindsay Davison from the power utility industry. Several leaders explained that traditional leadership styles "just wouldn't work" because they aren't acknowledged by young workers as suitable for today's standards. Practices and perspectives have changed in the demands for leadership. Ms. Davison, whose natural style is much more focused toward relationships, elaborated on these shifts in leadership:

> My leadership has consistently been a relational style, so it hasn't been a big change for me. But I know in my industry, it's been a huge shift in leadership expectations. The leader that I had 20 years ago would not be making it or cutting it today because they don't have those softer skills. So the demands have changed. I think it's tougher for some of our front line leaders who are process-based to shift toward this style. These people are focused on getting the job done, and they don't think about relationships so much. So, the people who were successful 20 years ago might perhaps struggle today.

Davison's explanation clarifies the prior notions that, while some individuals' natural styles are more traditional and often contingent upon the industry in which they lead, process-oriented and direct-style leaders are still recognizing the need for soft leadership skills. In fact, John Kipp from the professional services industry, admits to the traditional attitudes of individuals in his line of work, but expresses the need for relationship-building skills:

> I still run into people out there who think this whole idea of emotional intelligence is crazy. You know, some people wonder 'why do I need to pat somebody on the back for doing a good job? I don't need them to be happy; I need them to be productive.' We work in construction and that's kind of the attitudes in that

industry. I run into it a lot. And those things are shifting. We have to shut up

and do the job, but I think this whole idea of creating strong relationships and

connecting on an interpersonal level is really important, perhaps essential in

today's work environment.

Interestingly, only *three* of the ten leaders in industries where styles are traditionally more suited

for hard skills still attribute their leadership to this traditionally accepted manner, while the

others have adapted—if not already attributed to their *natural* style—the more contemporary

style of soft-skilled leadership. Melissa Harris from the healthcare industry expands upon this

shift regarding the differences in demographics of employees:

I think some of this is motivated by generational aspects. I think the younger

generation requires a whole different emotional connection to their employers.

Baby boomers tend to work hard, and younger adults tend to crave reinforcement

and a desire for connection. It's just a different need. So that's been a big change

for leadership. I think it's easier for women in leadership because we tend to have

that nurturing aspect…those softer skills. For men, especially older men, I think

it's more difficult, they have a harder time understanding that unless of course

they have their own children, but I think men struggle with this.

Similarly, while leading in an industry that acclimates to more traditional styles, Fred Benjamin

from the power utility industry discusses the need to adopt the new demands for leadership:

There is a change. We do have some people in leadership who still operate the old

fashioned way…Leadership, like anything else, is evolving. There's a new

generation, a new culture. Some of these older leaders are set in their ways and

they struggle. And it's been a problem. So one way we try to avoid that is to let

them be on the sidelines and observe, but take some of the leadership

responsibilities away from them. We don't see it as punishment, we see it as

accommodating their style and doing what's best for the organization. But the

point is, you have to adopt and change. Leaders have to accept that change.

The use of technology

Similar to generational shifts and the new demands for today's leadership, a second data

finding was that of technology in the workplace. Leaders explained that the presence of

technology has had a major impact on how individuals communicate with each other in the

workplace. Just as the younger generation has a different expectation for reinforcement and

connection with their leaders, so are their expectations regarding technology. "It's the culture.

Everybody operates by technology now," stated Mr. Benjamin in his follow up response to the

generational shift experienced by his business. "People don't even call me now, they text me.

It's a simple example of a changing environment. And that requires all of our leadership skills to

change… our soft skills to change." Furthermore, one major aspect among technological

advances is that of social media. Social media has created an expectation for a higher degree of

connectivity. Rich Mayberry from the power utility industry discussed how technology and

social media allows for employees to take care of more tasks throughout the day, while

simultaneously contributing to their ability to further develop their worker relationships:

We are a lot more connected with social media. 25 years ago I got my first

desktop. I did have a career before then, you know! We did work without

computers, believe it or not. It just provides a higher degree of connectivity.

There are not necessarily more relationships, but you talk about more things. The

ability to connect with each other is much easier. But at the same time, the

breadth of managerial concerns is broader.

Moreover, John Kipp from the professional services industry explained how both the age groups of employees and the popular use of social media has changed the demands for today's leadership:

There's a couple of dynamics that have changed leadership in the workplace. Age groups certainly matter. People that are coming in the workforce in the last decade are much more comfortable in a flexible work environment and the social media environment. So those aspects have changed the dynamic of leadership a lot. Those folks coming into the workplace have expectations of those types of things. And some of us who have been around a lot longer are still more comfortable with the traditional demands of work. So with those new expectations, leadership changes because we have to be aware of [age groups and expectations for social media and technology use] and adapt to them.

Expanding on this need to adapt to and, to be more cognizant of the new expectations with technology, Bobby Ricky from the power utility industry explained how leaders often fail because they do not successfully transition or adapt to the needs and perspectives of their employees:

The expectation of employees these days of how they're going to be treated and how they're not going to be treated is so different than what it was thirty years ago. I've seen people who were effective leaders 30 years ago, fail miserably today because they say or do the wrong thing in regards to the perspectives of their employees. The age generation and technology has a major influence on

these leadership changes. Regarding technology, you can't tell somebody they can't be plugged in to the world. That's what they know. That's what they're used to. So you have to be sensitive to those things and still get the job done. You have to have a high level of accountability but also be respectful of how different things are going to be with the age generations and technology advancements.

Therefore, based upon their observations and first-hand experiences with the growing advancements in technology and the generational shift among employees, leaders are acknowledging the further need for relations-oriented leadership skills. Aside from these two related aspects regarding the new demands in leadership, one major theme that quickly emerged considered contingent leadership styles based upon environmental aspects—particularly, industry-based leadership perspectives.

Industry-based leadership perspectives

One of the initial aspects that quickly developed during the onset of the interview process was that one's industry in which they led largely influenced their leadership style and attitudes on empathy. Similar to contingent leadership, where leaders' actions and behaviors are based on contextual factors such as the requirements discerned by the job, (Allio, 2013) leaders' attitudes toward exercising empathy are unique based upon their work environment. For example, in regards to the typical environmental differences for blue collar workers versus white collar workers, leaders who spend much of their time "on the grounds" with workers—such as on construction sites—view empathy differently than leaders in an opposite environment, such as a corporate office setting. It is likely then, that this theme was identified early on in the analytical process because the first three participants interviewed coincidentally lead in these blue-collar-type environments, particularly in the construction and power-utility industries. In a job that

deals with heavy equipment and machinery, concerns about safety often impacted one's

leadership style, which some scholars describe as utilizing *hard* skills. Sam McFarland from a

construction industry in Washington D.C., explained how his daily concerns about the job and

how the overall mission to produce results influences his perspective as a leader:

> I don't pity fools lightly. I am *not* a micromanager, but my leadership style is still
>
> very direct…no nonsense…I would say I am definitely focused on producing
>
> results. At the root of the work we do, we tend to have more problems. I'm used
>
> to working in that kind of atmosphere, that's why I say, 'I don't pity fools lightly.'
>
> We always have to keep our mission in mind. That's why my style is more
>
> direct…Because I'm so direct I have a reputation for being a grump, so some
>
> people often take their issues to the chief of staff or our director…Some people
>
> say that I can be intimidating, but for those who know me, my direct colleagues, I
>
> can be fun to be around. But, when the bell rings, it's work time.

Similarly, Ted Morgan from the manufacturing industry, explained how his upbringing and past

observations on leadership have influenced his current style toward traditional styles of

leadership:

> My father was a lumberjack and he acts like a marine drill sergeant, so
>
> consequently, I'm kind of the same way. So I guess it could make things worse in
>
> some cases if I give my workers a kick in the ass and tell them to get over their
>
> issues. But other times, it might be that some people need to get over it. In my
>
> industry people know they aren't coming to work to get the soft shoulder to lean
>
> on. They have to perform. So I guess it depends on what you've learned and
>
> what you're style is, as well as what the job entails.

This doesn't mean, however, that leaders completely discount the need for building strong relationships in the work place. Even those leaders who utilize more hard skills on the job—such as on the construction site or in the power industry—still recognize the importance of relational skills or approaching their employees with empathy. "Different times call for different measures" one leader explained. Depending on the job or the particular requirements, negative emotions are often necessary for generating motivation and achievement in individuals. It is important to note though, that while it is sometimes effective for short term results, hard skills such as anger, oppression, and threats are not a sustainable successful style of leading. Bob Thompson from the construction industry further explicates this notion:

> If one flies off the handle about everything, it becomes old, oppressive, and ineffective, not to mention highly resented. Employees won't run through a wall for a boss who is always like that. They will do what it takes to get the job done and no more. It is not seen as a sign of strength, rather weakness. If on the other hand, a manager is generally approachable and likable, then occasional bursts of emotion can be highly effective and attention-getting. A major point I noticed in my career, however, is that unfortunately, anger and threats are sometimes the only language some people get. In other words, you cannot get their attention to the urgency of an issue until you light them up. Unfortunate, but true.

Therefore, although negative emotions are sometimes conducive to the requirements of a particular job, many leaders agreed that there is a stark difference between the level of output that employees will produce for individuals who constantly lead with intimidation tactics, versus those who are aware of emotions and focus on building strong relationships.

To further clarify the notion that industry-based perspectives—or, context—can often influence leaders' views on empathy, Mandy Voegel, whose traditional leadership style primarily focused on reaching outcomes over building relationships, discussed how her position in marketing has a large focus on building rapport with her team members and clients:

> It was uncomfortable at first for me to open up myself to my team members. But, at the same time, a lot of things have happened in my life—being a mother of two kids has given me a better perspective on what's important. We work to live, we don't live to work. And my job isn't going to be the one holding my hand in the end. My family is… so it gave me a better perspective on what's important to my team members. And that balance and recognition of what's going on in our personal lives and how it impacts our professional lives is really important. So while at first I think it might have been different for me, I can definitely see the value in [empathy] and how important it is to build strong relationships. If you don't know each other and have some personal ties, I think you're less effective in working together as a team. So it's definitely something I've bought into.

The accounts discussed by leaders in this section clarify how industry-based perspectives and particular contexts can have an influence on leaders' views and/or implementation of empathy in the workplace. Even in an environment where negative emotion is often conducive for producing short term results, most leaders generally agreed that empathy—albeit contrasting from their innate leadership style—is important for building strong relationships, which supports the scholarly notions outlined in the positive effects of empathetic leadership. The most common theme that emerged, however, regarding empathy as a facet of today's leadership, regarded the basic aspect of employees' humanness.

Employees as people first; and workers second

Regardless of one's natural leadership style, or whether or not their particular work environment called for *hard* or *soft* leadership skills, every leader recognized the importance of empathy for the foundational reason that it is a genuine relational skill. Throughout the interviews, when I had inquired about the capacity to respond to emotional issues or complaints about work, responses such as "people are people," "we are all human," and "there's a *whole* person there, not just a *worker*" were common statements made by each leader. While work pays the bills, it is not the priority. Every leader discussed, to varying extents, the importance of creating bonds and building strong relationships in the work place for the primary reason that we spend a majority of our time at work. Just as we experience highs and lows in our personal lives, we experience similar emotions at work—whether they are work related or more so connected to a personal issue. Denise Goddard from the construction industry, discussed her keen insights on emotions as a daily part of the job, and how important it is to recognize and cope with the emotions experienced by her team members:

> You have to deal with emotions in the workplace. It's essential. Otherwise
> you're missing an entire component of the workplace. Emotions are a part of
> everyday life. Unless you have robots working for you, it's absolutely necessary
> to acknowledge these emotions and address them head on. Emotions affect the
> way we work and how we get work done, so we want everyone to feel
> comfortable and confident. I'm really happy to work for a place where we talk a
> lot about feelings and emotions…Making decisions in the workplace affects the
> whole person, not just the work person. They have families and other personal

concerns. So, the way we communicate with each other and work with each other

every day has consequences beyond the office.

In terms of "consequences beyond the office," Fred Whitman from a power utility corporation,

whose job requirements primarily focus on action, process, and results, reinforces the importance

of implementing humanitarian etiquette with his employees:

On our job site, we've got to get from point A to point B. That's really important.

You know, discipline is not a bad thing, but there's a time and place for process.

At the end of the day, people are people…We are all human. I talk to my

employees and try to understand them. Getting to know them is really important

to me…I observe emotion…We are a family within a family.

Expanding on Galvin's statements about the importance of responding to emotions in the

workplace, the notion that leaders recognize their employees as *people* first, and as *workers*

second, promotes an awareness that the work day is not always "smooth sailing," as another

leader described. Emotions frequently arise. Sometimes employees have bad days. A large part

of empathetic leadership is having the aptitude to respond to emotional or personal issues. Other

times, leaders must respond to issues relative to employee concerns or complaints. These were

two areas of inquiry specifically explored in the interview, and they are appropriately suited

within the person-first-worker-second theme. Therefore, two subsections of this theme are as

follows: a) responding to emotional/personal issues, and b) responding to work

complaints/concerns, and each is further explicated in the divisions below.

Responding to emotional/personal issues According to most leaders, responding to emotional

and personal issues in the workplace becomes a balancing act. While some leaders differed in

their perspectives on responding to emotional issues, most of them generally agreed that, to

varying extents, it is vital to recognize employees' personal or emotional concerns in regards to the effect it has on their overall performance. "It's really just human nature," stated John Kipp. "When we're able to address our employees' emotional situations, they're generally more happy and more satisfied. And, when we're happy and satisfied, we are confident; when we're confident, we do our best work," Kipp explained. The primary difference in leaders' responses focused on the fact that dealing with emotional issues in the workplace may or may not be appropriate. Leaders explained how they balance these concerns about what is—and what is not—appropriate with the goals, mission, or vision of the job in mind while still viewing each employee as a *whole* person. For example, a common discussion in each interview was in regards to noticing when an employee might be having a *bad day*. For whatever reason, their bad day is affecting their mood, may be impacting other team members, and in extreme cases, may negatively influence their progress on the job. Previously mentioned was the notion that one's industry often influences their attitudes toward exercising empathy on the job; and, that some leaders employed more hard, or traditional styles of leadership, rather than offering the "soft shoulder to lean on." Contrarily, and interestingly enough, were that some of these same leaders recognized the importance for empathy when an employee is having a bad day—especially as it relates to safety concerns. Peter Farley from the power utility industry explained how he tries to be empathetic in certain situations even if it is not part of his natural style:

> If I noticed an employee was having a bad day, I'll let them talk about it at a level that they are comfortable with. Even though it's not my nature, I will try to be empathetic with them in this sense. More importantly, though, is that we try to train our supervisors to recognize things like this with their employees. When you're in the field dealing with hazardous situations or components like in the

power plant or distribution system, we ask our supervisors to recognize when

employees are having a bad day and could potentially be distracted, and then to

give them work accordingly. If they're mentally distracted, don't give them

something that is potentially going to be hazardous. Figure out a way that they

are mentally in the game or assign them something different. We don't want our

workers being paralyzed by any mental concerns.

Not only should emotions be appropriately dealt with in a sense to make employees *feel* better,

as well as to physically keep them safe, but they should also be addressed as a means to prevent

unfavorable outcomes with *other* employees. Particular to bad behaviors—which are seen as

inappropriate emotions in the workplace—David Greer from the power utility industry said that

"you have to listen to everybody, even if it is someone with a bad attitude." Greer explained

how a complete lack of attention to emotions has a negative impact not only on the employee,

but on other team members as well:

> If somebody is having a problem emotionally, and you can see it as a leader,
>
> everybody else can see it, too. If you don't address it, everybody knows it. So,
>
> you have to be fair and consistent with everybody. I've had people with horrible
>
> behaviors who are top-notch performers, but I had to address it because the
>
> behavior was negatively affecting others. It squashes people. You're not a good
>
> leader if you don't deal with the individual problems in the organization. You
>
> can't let bad apples exist. So, all emotions have to be dealt with, good or bad, but
>
> you have to deal with them fairly and think about how it's impacting the work
>
> environment. And, the only way to know that is to get out in the field. You have

to interact. You can't sit at the top of the pyramid and watch. You have to listen

to everybody.

Therefore, leaders generally agreed that responding to emotions is vital—whether they are good

or bad—as it relates to employees' mental well-being, satisfaction and overall productivity on

the job, which will further be explained in the final category of this section.

Responding to work concerns/complaints Similar to the likelihood for employees to

experience emotional or personal issues in the workplace, is the likelihood for concerns about the

job—and/or complaints—to occasionally emerge at work. If such complaints or concerns are not

handled by leadership effectively, employees will start to feel a sense of little value where their

words or ideas are not appreciated. Changes cannot always be made, and employees may not

always receive the outcome they desired, but they do appreciate when their voices are heard.

Each leader explained these incidences of responding to concerns or complaints as "having an

open door policy." Peter Farley discussed how he does his best to respond to complaints but

recognizes that it's not always possible to assuage every single worker:

> People come to me with complaints all the time, usually about working conditions
>
> or policy statements, that are going on that they don't necessarily like. Some
>
> people see me directly or will send letters or emails. So, anytime I get one of
>
> those, I'll ask questions to understand the situation and I'll always follow up with
>
> supervision—somebody in their chain with details on it who can get back to the
>
> employee. Sometimes there can be things to be fixed; other times, employees
>
> may not understand the context of the situation. We always try to close the loop,
>
> but it doesn't always mean they'll get the answer they are looking for.

Leaders acknowledged that responses to employees' concerns or complaints are not always congruent with the employees' desires, but the employees nevertheless appreciate the opportunity to be heard, or "cared about," as some leaders described.

Link between empathy and employee productivity/task engagement

Every leader acknowledged that soft skills like empathy have some positive impact on the productivity or task engagement of employees. The ability to recognize employees as people and to accept emotions as a daily part of the work environment is a major aspect of the relations-route to leadership. When considering the two primary routes to leadership—process-oriented and relations-oriented (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002)—the literature review argued early on that, while process-oriented leadership focuses on task engagement and achieving results, both routes are equally important for organizational success. Relations-oriented behaviors can certainly be facilitating factors in the task-engagement of employees (Wolf, Pescosolido, and Druskat, 2002; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Without the establishment and maintenance of strong work relationships, the desired organizational outcomes will be difficult to achieve. Therefore, this was an area of inquiry I wanted to explore to find any similar perspectives in support of the literature. Most employees appreciate leaders who have strong relational skills and emotional intelligence, and such a leadership style is thus a motivational factor in their overall work productivity. Shawn Romney from the construction industry, all the way from England, explicated some scholarly assertions regarding the differences between hard-nosed leadership and empathetic leadership and their impacts on worker satisfaction, as well as overall worker potential:

> If you're in an environment that feels like a factory, you're limited in your work.
> Workers feel like they are inside of a box. They won't be happy. They won't

41

want to stay with it and you're limiting what they can actually do. If you're in an

environment where you're more focused on the end goal and it is collaborative,

you're unlocking what we call the 'higher level person.'

Other leaders described the link between empathy and productivity as the impact on "the overall

health of the organization." *Health* of the organization was first mentioned by Rick Martin from

the construction industry, who described how meaningful interaction with leaders and employees

has a direct link to their productivity, and, what's more, the organization as a whole:

It's shocking to think that anyone would advocate for process before relationships

regarding leadership routes. In certain cases, absent relationships, no process is

going to make a place run on rails…So, it's very important that the interactions

are always healthy. It doesn't necessarily have to be positive, but is there

meaningful interaction? Is there a linkage between someone's state of mind and

productivity or, what I might call, the health of the organization? They're

absolutely related. But, can people not be in a positive frame of mind and still

produce tasks? Yes. I don't know how much thought leadership goes into

creating a widget or performing mindless tasks…there doesn't seem to be a whole

lot. But proportionally, what's most important is that, from a health and state of

mind standpoint, the more the interactions impact the health of the organization

and health of other individuals, no questions asked, there's a huge impact.

Martin makes an interesting point about how individuals can still produce tasks while being in a

negative state of mind, especially if it is simple task or a process they are generally accustomed

to. In regards to the notion that relations-oriented skills are a preceding factor toward process or

output, employees can still likely perform their daily tasks whether or not their leaders help to

enhance their state of mind. *How well* then, as described by Dan Copocelli from the Banking industry, they can continue to perform these tasks becomes the question to consider. In addition to the previously mentioned concerns for safety (i.e., mental distractions can increase the likelihood for hazardous situations, in extreme cases) consistency becomes a crucial factor. Copocelli described this as sustainability:

> There's a real link between soft skills, productivity, and long-term sustainability. You can still get great responses immediately by focusing only on the hard skills, the technical, operational, the performance side… but for that to truly be sustainable, you know… the awareness issue of self and others… it has to be engaged for those things to be sustainable long term. The 'how' matters in whether or not it's sustainable. If you impose directives as a manager, and you ride that staff really hard, you might make a short term accomplishment, but if you don't go about that in the right way and be sensitive to their needs and their issues, then they can't sustain success long term. 85 percent of all corporate initiatives fail because of the improper culture or lack of culture.

Similarly, Bobby Ricky from the power utility industry metaphorically elaborates on the stark difference between hard skills and soft skills and their impact on productivity as it relates to sustainability:

> If the ox is in the ditch, sometimes you just have to kick it till it gets out of the ditch. But that's only a one act play. It doesn't really work for the long term. If you're always direct and autocratic, how do you have a second act to that? Because that style just doesn't work for very long. To have a long-lasting idea of improved safety and quality and continuous improvement, you have to have a

43

style that has a high level of empathy and emotional intelligence, as well as

accountability. But the longevity of what you're doing is going to be directly

proportional to your maintaining a calm demeanor in the organization.

Lastly, Don Berris now retired and currently creating a consulting firm, talked about how his

presence—both physically and mentally—with his team members has a major impact on their

productivity. Establishing a human element with his workers is a priority for him, and he

strongly advocates an upbeat, energetic, and physical presence as a leader when an important job

needs to be done:

That element of humanness is, with no doubt in my mind, a motivating factor in

productivity. I get to know all my workers. I ask them about their lives… I get

excited when they get excited, whether it's work related or not. And, when it

came to a deadline, I was *more* energetic and involved when that deadline was

approaching.   The more I can keep them going with the right attitude during

crunch time, my employees love that. That visibility, that presence and

interaction, that's really important. They see that and they think "the big guy is

out here with us." And that's a good feeling. Those boys get the job done.

Based on these testimonials, and many more, leaders' affirmations about empathetic

leadership traits and their positive impact on employee productivity/engagement support the

scholarly assertions about empathy's positive effects on organizations.   However, while leaders

are confirming that empathy is certainly—to varying degrees—an aspect of their leadership

style, further question remains as to additional ways in which leaders exercise or promote

qualities like empathy in the workplace. Consequently, research question two sought out to

investigate what empathy looks like in practice in contemporary corporate leadership, focusing on specific areas of inquiry.

Results pertaining to RQ2

The second research question sought to explore how individuals implement empathetic qualities in their leadership practices. This research question yielded three major data findings and one theme regarding the conscientious practice of empathetic leadership: 1) types of training programs/workshops, 2) organizational success measures (an embedded theme) 3) daily communication habits/interaction, and 4) work activities/traditions, all of which are further elaborated in the sections below.

Types of training programs/workshops

In regards to the need to educate employers on the importance of empathetic leadership practices, I believe it is important to consistently grow in leadership learning and development. Therefore, I sought to ask leaders what training programs or workshops are in place in their organizations regarding a focus on soft, relationship-building skills. Aside from the general training programs required for new employees, leaders discussed some particular workshops that organizational members participate in at least once a year. Conflict resolution training was a major theme discussed by several leaders, where individuals are taught to develop effective communication skills that help in situations under high stress or conflict. "Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when the Stakes are High" (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2012) was the book that many leaders utilize in these specific types of trainings. Many leaders owned a copy in their personal book collection in the office. *Crucial Conversations* has not only been useful in corporate settings but for individuals' personal lives as well, which

further reinforces the importance of effective interpersonal exchanges, in which empathy is a major component.

"Strengths Finder 2.0" (Rath, 2007) was another common bestselling book discussed by leaders that is used in their training workshops, which measures and ranks one's 38 different strengths. Many leaders discussed how the measurements of their strengths impacted their own awareness when interacting with their team members. For example, Bill Roberts is not only cognizant of his own top strengths but is sure to investigate his team members' strengths before a meeting:

> When I have a personal meeting with my team members, I'll pull up their top five strengths and really think about their strengths before the meeting starts. Depending on their strengths, my conversations with them in our meeting will definitely vary. If someone is more analytical, they don't want to chit chat. If someone is strong in 'woo' (a skill regarding the ability to build relationships or, work the room, if you will) I'll know to change my communication so I can relate better in our meeting. I really adapt my style to whomever it is I'm talking to. 'Woo' is at the bottom of list for me. My number on is 'context.' It's a bit of a history thing. I approach things with my past experiences. That's how I gain empathy with my people. I tell stories.

Regarding these strengths, Peter Farley was one of the few leaders who admitted that empathy is not a natural skill in his personal repertoire, explaining that "woo"—a skill that characterizes an individual who *works the room* and engages in ongoing conversations—was at the bottom of his list.

People with a high "woo" score are probably more empathetic by nature... It's at

the bottom of my list. But I know that my role requires me to do those things, so I

do it. It's a huge challenge, but I do it and I have no problem doing it, because I

know it's part of my role as a leader... People expect you to talk to them. It helps

with the work relationships… I understand it's an important trait that comes with

the job, even if I'm uncomfortable doing it. But I do it.

While empathy may not be a skill he attributes to his natural leadership style, Farley's ability to

step outside of his comfort zone and recognize what "makes people tick" is arguably a rather

empathetic leadership quality. "Recognition," he says, is his "soft skill piece." Anything after

that however, "is the challenging part of my job."

General communication skills regarding relationship maintenance is also important

training for leaders and their team members. Melissa Harris describes how empathy is a crucial

communicative skill in the hospital setting—not only for patients and their families but with co-

workers as well—thus, much of her organization's training workshops focus on effective

communication skills:

Our training and orientation programs are important in our organization. Nurses

and doctors don't receive communication training in medical school. They might

have compassion, but they're not equipped with those types of skills. It's really

important how we say things to families. Empathy is a huge element in the

hospital system. The *way* we say and do things matter. So, we are constantly

working on communication within the organization. And, this consequently

carries over to inter-employee communication as well, not just with patients and

customers. If it's important with the customers, it's important to have with our

co-workers as well.

Many other leaders commented on their participation in specific trainings regarding employee

engagement through the Gallup Corporation, which ties to RQ1's data finding: the link between

empathy and employee productivity/engagement. Therefore, while it is a major aspect of their

training, the Gallup Training is more suitable for the following category: organizational success

measures. Organizational success measures therefore emerged as a theme within the specific

area of investigation regarding training workshops.

Organizational success measures

Many organizations often have quantitative measures that illustrate how the company is

progressing in one or more aspects. Analyses of these measurements allow organizational

leaders to determine and establish any changes or adaptations that should be made by the

organization to attain any needed improvements. One of these measures, as discussed by many

leaders, is The Gallup Workplace Audit (1992-1999), commonly known as the Gallup Q12

Employee Engagement Survey. Stemming from research endeavors by Dr. Donald Clifton in the

1950s in determining "the factors that contribute positively to [work] environments and that

enable [workers] to capitalize on their unique talents", the Q12 measures employees' perceptions

of the quality of their work experiences (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Asplund, p. 6).

Specifically, twelve items measure how "engaged" employees are with their work relative to

their satisfaction—items which have been "found to be actionable at the supervisor or manager

level" (p. 10). Though empathy is not explicitly addressed in the items, a majority of these

twelve items are inherently embedded with important interpersonal skills like empathy. Lindsay

Davison from the power utility industry, was the first to describe her experience with the Q12

and how effective it has been for Detroit Edison in regards to employee performance:

> I've been through employee engagement Gallup Training through the Gallup
>
> Corporation. A lot of those questions are based on relational skills, such as, 'I
>
> have a best friend at work,' or, 'my supervisor cares about me.' I've done some
>
> analysis that shows the specific relationship between Gallup scores and
>
> performance issues around reliability, safety, and quality. So, if you have a high
>
> Gallup, all of those things are rated positively. If you have a low Gallup, there's
>
> legitimate data that shows less productivity tied to engagement.

Davison went on to clarify how her behavior and her colleagues' behaviors as leaders—in

regards to relational skills like empathy—have a major impact on their Gallup scores. "A lot of

this really starts at the top", she explained. Davison' statement is also further evidence of the

importance for empathetic leadership as it relates to employee satisfaction and overall

productivity. Rich Mayberry, one of Davison's colleagues, discussed how pleased he is with his

company's recent Q12 scores:

> We administrate the Gallup Q12 twice a year. My organization sits at 4.42 (out of
>
> 5). And those that report to me directly sit at 4.99. We've never always been that
>
> high, but we are today, and we're feeling really good about that.

In addition to the Q12 Employee Engagement Survey, several other leaders, particularly from the

same company, discussed a leadership development series that has been implemented in their

organization and how it has exceptionally improved their organizational performance,

particularly in regards to their measures on the Denison Model (Denison, 1990). The Denison

Model utilizes two frameworks—the Organizational Culture Model, and the Leadership

Development Model—to measure 4 essential traits of organizations: adaptability, mission, consistency, and involvement. While the Denison primarily is a measurement of culture, empathetic skills have a large impact on the culture of connection in organizational environments. Since empathy influences the level of connection and comfort of employees in the workplace, leaders see a measurement of culture as a validation of the strategies they've implemented in regards to the relational skills apt for leadership. In fact, three of the interviewed leaders proclaimed that their Denison scores have improved dramatically over the years, and they credit that improvement to their deliberate change and implementation of leadership and communication training. Denise Goddard from the construction industry briefly explained their leadership development series:

> We have a leadership development series that we've been running our officers and directors through. It's a two-year seminar, where every quarter, we meet with a small group of 8 to 10 people. We have an organizational psychologist on staff, Dan, who's in charge of these types of training programs. We look at things such as conflict resolution, dealing with difficult conversations, and we've focused a lot lately on emotional intelligence…you know, being able to discern one's emotional currency and understanding people's emotions… and we look a lot at diversity…so it's a lot of focus on soft skills, but they are so important to the health of the organization. Our growth over the years has been exceptional.

Ms. Goddard's statement about their series' focus on emotional intelligence is further evidence of the recent emphasis in soft skills for leadership, especially since empathy is a major component of emotional intelligence. Rick Martin further clarifies his first-hand experience with

the company's growth and credits much of the company's success to their organizational psychologist:

> In 2011 when I moved into my role as President, we had not engaged any type of leadership or relationship training prior to that. Everything was solely technical-based and managing our process; and, according to our scores on the Denison, the company was not performing very well at all. My predecessor did fairly divisive things that caused a lot of unhealthy tension and friction. Our financial performance at the time was poor. Based on our scores, we put in a lot of time on improving our vision and working together to move the needle. Dan, our organizational psychologist and Director of Business Development has had a huge hand in our vision toward improvement. He has made a significant difference in helping our teams grow together and helping employees understand themselves and each other better, as well as growing in their level of emotional intelligence. Today, we spend a healthy amount of time for our senior leaders' engagement in these types of workshops. Once this was implemented, it's positively implemented the health of the organization, and in the first year our scores improved tremendously. And a year later, the needle moved again quite a bit… There's not a shadow of doubt in my mind that building healthy relationships and organizational performance are closely linked. We thank Dan for helping to institutionalize that.

Lastly, and more simply put, Mandy Voegel from the construction industry—who naturally tends to focus more on *process*—explains how she's noticed the importance of soft skills as it relates to employee engagement and the progression her organization has made:

Just looking at our Denison surveys, we can see the improvement on paper…

we've established our purpose and values and implemented peer group meetings,

leadership opportunities and relationship and communication training and

workshops, all of that has helped build people's personal relationships and our

company's personal touch in valuing the employees and the company's

relationship to every individual and why they matter… that's really helped

improve morale and productivity across the board.

Based upon these leaders' first hand experiences of their company's progressions, organizational

measures from models or surveys such as the Gallup Q12 and the Denison are further

quantitative proof that soft leadership skills like empathy have a positive impact on

organizational outcomes, which further confirms the scholarly assertions proposed in the

literature review. However, it is interesting to note the organizational impact that these

quantitative measures have in a study designed specifically for the qualitative paradigm. Further

elaboration on such will be presented in the discussion section.

Training programs, workshops, and quantitative measures are only the first step in

implementing particular leadership skills or behaviors. Consistent, positive interactions among

leaders and team members are crucial for sustained organizational progression. Thus, the next

theme regards the day-to-day behaviors in which leaders practice effective interpersonal skills

such as empathy.

Daily communication habits/interactions

The first research question identified four particular themes regarding the conscientious

practice of empathy as an aspect of one's leadership. One of these themes was delineated as

"employees as people first, and workers second." In this regard, I had inquired about two sub-

categories: "responding to emotions/personal issues" and "responding to concerns/complaints about work". The capacity for leaders' to effectively respond to team members' emotions or concerns is certainly an aspect of the daily interactions leaders' experience with their subordinates. Thus, while the two categories overlap, it is also important to explore additional day-to-day behaviors of leaders that have similar positive influences on employee attitudes and engagement. The *daily communication/interaction* category resulted from participants' elaboration upon their own leadership styles. For example, many leaders described a "collaborative" leadership style. "I love working in teams and I enjoy working on a big problem together," explained Denise Goddard. Lindsay Davison advocated for strong listening skills in her leadership practices. "I am light on the talking and heavy on the listening. I really like to invest myself in understanding the strengths of my employees and playing to their strengths as opposed to just working to get the job done. The best way to do so is to listen and really get to know my team members." Likewise, David Greer further advocated for effective listening skills, not only because it helps to identify workers' strengths, but because it is the *right* thing to do:

> Leaders who do the right thing listen to the employees who are closest to the work. A lot of times their subordinates know more about what's going on in a particular job. When I was Executive VP in a new position, I didn't know what was going on in a certain shop, but people there did, and I wanted them to tell me. I was better able to understand the job requirements because I listened to everybody. Real leaders listen to the employees and do the right thing. It's a sense of collaborative leadership. They understand that the employees closest to the work have the proper knowledge, and they give them the freedom to perform

their jobs. That sense of trust and the accountability we gave them was really

appreciated by our guys.

Parallel to listening is open communication. John Kipp mentioned how he leads by example,

always trying to uphold the values of his organization and putting absolute trust in his team

members, and how open, effective communication helps to establish strong relationships and

mutual respect:

Having a strong relationship is one of the most important things. It's absolutely

vital. Mutual respect makes for a good relationship. What does that look like?

It's clear, open, candid communication… openness to questions and ability to

clarify things. I want my supervisors to feel comfortable and I want to be open to

them. I don't want people to be afraid. It's all about two-way open

communication. It's really based on mutual respect.

Each participant's particular leadership styles consequentially influenced their day-to-day casual

interactions with co-workers and subordinates. Several leaders mentioned that they are happy to

be in a work environment that feels much like a second family, and because of it, they believe

their organizations are much more successful. For instance, Denise Goddard pointed out that she

works with people that talk a lot about their feelings, whether they are based on personal or

emotional issues or a casual conversation about family ties. Because of it, Goddard and her team

members have been able to maintain strong work relationships:

Emotions, both good and bad, affect the way we work and how we get work done,

so we want everyone to feel comfortable and confident. I'm really happy to work

for a place where we talk a lot about feelings and emotions…my communication

habits really help me create strong bonds with my team members. I don't think I'd

be successful in my current position if I wasn't good at forming strong bonds and

maintaining the relationships that I have. If somebody ever needs help or

information, a lot of people come to me for guidance; and that feels good.

Goddard also explained how her communication habits and her ability to form strong

relationships have been a positive influence in her endeavors to recruit presenters for new hire

orientations:

I've asked a lot of people in the organization to be speakers and to deliver

presentations at our orientation events for new hires. They are not required to

oblige, as they are all very busy with large projects of their own. But, they've all

agreed to help out because they are dedicated toward our vision. And, I honestly

think that if I didn't have such a strong connection with everyone around here,

it'd be a lot harder to recruit presenters.

Lastly, John Kipp was very confident in his communication skills, asserting that they have a

large impact on the engagement of his team members:

At the risk of sounding boisterous, I believe personally that human compassion is

one of my better skills. I certainly believe that I have one of the best interpersonal

skills with the team, and it's certainly a motivating factor in their task

engagement.

A skill like empathy surely allows leaders to exercise similar traits such as listening, open

communication, and the ability to establish mutual respect and strong relationships. Therefore,

daily communication habits and interactions with employees—both casually and

professionally—have a large impact on the health of the organization.

Work activities/traditions

The final data finding regarding the second research question was that of common work activities or traditions. Taking part in certain work gatherings or rituals further helped team members to establish strong relationships, and participants discussed how certain activities were established by leadership. For example, Fred Whitman discussed how his organization continually updates their intranet with fun facts about every employee, birthday notifications, and interactive tools, all which help to create a culture of connection:

> We have an intranet system where we update everybody's personal information such as birthdays and interesting facts. Within it are also interactive tools for connecting with employees throughout the company. Our employees like that. It's a nice mental break from the rigorous demands of daily work. We're reminded that we're all human, and it helps to find something we all have in common. We're more comfortable with each other when we can relate like that.

Acknowledgment of an employee's birthdays, work accomplishments, and milestones are important for many organizational leaders. In fact, in my elevator ride after my interview with Rick Martin, I met two women who were holding beautifully wrapped, pastel colored gifts. They excitedly told me they were heading to a luncheon to celebrate an employee's baby shower. They expressed how important it is in their company to acknowledge and celebrate employees' personal and professional accomplishments. They asserted that an established work culture such as that makes coming into work every day so much more enjoyable. "Everybody really cares about each other here," they explained. "We all support each other." When the elevator door opened and I had said my goodbyes to the kind women, I was thankful for those thirty seconds in the elevator, thinking that I was in the right place at the right time.

Discussion

56

The literature review and current study have confirmed the importance of empathy in leadership—especially in today's corporate organizations. The study sought to investigate two primary questions:

RQ1) How do leaders view empathy as an aspect of their leadership, and

RQ2) How is empathy established in practice by today's corporate leaders? Semi-structured interviews with 18 leaders from various corporate organizations yielded interesting and valuable insights regarding empathy as an essential leadership trait. There were five primary categories (two of which were emergent themes) corresponding to leaders' perspectives on empathy as an aspect of their leadership (RQ1):

- generational demographics of employees,

- use of technology,

- industry-based leader perspectives,

- viewing employees as *people* rather than workers (where two sub-categories were explored):

    o responding to emotional/personal issues, and

    o responding to concerns/complaints about work,

- and the link between empathy and employee productivity/engagement

The specific categories delineated in regards to additional ways in which empathy is established in corporate organizational culture (RQ2) were:

- training programs/workshops,

- organizational success measures (an embedded theme),

- daily communication habits/interaction, and

- work activities/traditions

There was a particularly interesting revelation that appeared after all of the data had been analyzed and reported. Regarding the emergent theme on organizational success measures, leaders displayed much enthusiasm for their quantitative measures on the Gallup Q12 and the Denison surveys indicating the positive growth of their organization. While the quantitative scores are tangible evidence of the positive impact that the implemented practices, communication habits, and/or trainings have had on organizational performance, some leaders' statements regarding these quantitative scores were perhaps heavily saturated with enthusiasm compared to other responses throughout the interview.   Does a focus on these numerical outcomes counteract the ultimate focus on building and maintaining relationships? Does this then mean that leaders are inherently partial to process-oriented routes to leadership and are only interested in "the numbers?" Some may argue that these questions are viable. My conclusion is that, rather, this is positive support for the quality behind leaders' behaviors. After some reflection, I realized that some significant conclusions can be drawn.

First, such measures verify how employees' *perceptions* influence leader effectiveness. Recall from the literature review that it is worker perceptions of their leaders that best indicate the effectiveness of the leader (Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2011).   Individuals with high empathetic traits and considerate behaviors are perceived by their peers and subordinates to have high attributions of leadership (Kellet, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006), which would thus be illustrated on measures organizational culture and therefore of leadership, such as Gallup scores.

Moreover, it is important to note that the interviewed leaders' behaviors are not, nor should they be, manipulative selfish acts in order to reach desirable quantitative measures. Similar to David Greer's emphasis on leaders who "do the right thing," Rich Mayberry explained

how his leadership style is not a devious act in order to get a desired outcome out of his employees:

> I think that leadership more or less becomes a way of being. Imagine if somebody works really hard because they really like his or her boss. But what if something comes up in employees' lives which will not allow them to work as hard at the time? Well, do I judge them because of that? No, I let them know to hit it hard on the days they can, and to take care of themselves and the family. But it isn't just for me. It's for us… the whole of us. It's a mosaic of everyone. If the bargain is, "I like you, therefore you work hard," well, that's a little trite…a little thin… dishonest in some ways. If you have a bargain like that, does that bargain fall apart if something comes up that just doesn't allow you to work as hard as you normally would? No, that's silly, and I don't think it should work that way. It's like a life timeline. You're going to have your ups and downs. Some years are stronger than others. Does that mean you have to hold that bargain for years? No. A really seasoned leader recognizes that people are managing their lives and takes that into account.

Mayberry's enthusiasm about his desirable scores on the last Gallup Q12 is positive reinforcement of the effectiveness of his leadership behaviors, and that enthusiasm is certainly warranted. In addition, Brandon Thomas explained how manipulative leadership behavior designed to reach "better scores" is most likely transparent, and, in the long run, probably would not result in desirable outcomes:

> If I was a hard-nosed jerk 11 months out of the year, and for a month I really turned on the charm around my employees—you know, buying them pizza,

59

having luncheons, giving them paid time off—just before a survey rolls out soon

thereafter, those employees are going to see right through that, and those scores

will ultimately reflect that. These scores are based on year-round performance,

not a last minute effort to obtain those five gold stars, if you will. You can fool

some of the people *some* of the time, but not *most* of the people *most* of the time.

It just doesn't work that way.

Therefore, enthusiasm about positive quantitative measures for organizational culture is indeed

justified because it is tangible evidence of positive organizational effectiveness, and realistically,

is not easily manipulated. Simply put, for those leaders who are just concerned with their scores,

their results usually reflect that accordingly. And, those leaders who take the intent of the

quantitative organizational pulse-reading surveys to heart, enjoy the benefits of highly reflective

ratings.

The excitement of the organizational quantitative measures then brings me to my next set

of conclusions. Quantitative or qualitative measures, existing alone, are not—nor should they

be—the sine qua non for measuring data. Together, qualitative and quantitative measures

complement each other and lend further support to prior assertions made by proponents of each.

Next, regarding the two routes to leadership, the literature review suggested that process-oriented

and relations-oriented routes to leadership are both equally important for organizational

effectiveness, but standing alone, these leadership styles are fragile without the mutual support of

one route to another. The literature review also suggested that relations-oriented leadership is

perhaps a preceding factor in achieving desired process measures. The leaders' claims that—

since the implementation of training workshops on particular soft skills—their organizational

success measures have been positive in nature further lends evidence of the need for both routes

to leadership. Particularly, it reinforces the claims that relations-oriented leadership is a preceding factor in process-oriented leadership.

Lastly, in regards to numbers, the enthusiasm regarding quantitative measures brings attention to the value of each type of paradigm. While qualitative inquiry like this study yields valuable and rich insights *beyond* that of numerical measures, it can often, in and of itself, leave question and ambiguity in the interpretation of results. Conversely, quantitative data is valid evidence of the relative extent regarding a particular phenomenon, but it lacks rich, detailed and elaborative data in support of such numbers. Neither paradigm should overshadow the other. Rather, this calls for focus on utilizing mixed methods in future organizational endeavors as well as scholarly research and beyond.

In a final reflection on empathetic leadership, when considering if a single individual with high empathy can have a major influence on the bottom line of an organization, the aforementioned claims by scholars and results from the present study suggest that this is highly feasible. It is the duty of leaders to care about their employees, and they should exert empathy and concern at all times (Holt & Marques, 2012). Considerate and humanistic behaviors like empathy are preferred and perceived by subordinates to be desirable and effective among their leaders. Perhaps of major significance is the argument that good relational-behaviors yield effective task engagement among subordinates. While task-oriented leadership is important for performance, a human aspect typically precedes and is required for overall organizational performance. Imaginably so, it is likely that the Business Leaders for Michigan acknowledged this at the 2013 Summit held in Detroit. This study argued that one major way to keep employees happy and committed to their organization is through empathetic leadership. In fact, in the final minutes of my last interview with Denise Goddard, she coincidentally explained how

the organizations that make their employees happy are generally going to be the most successful, especially in regards to the freedom of *choice* that individuals have for employment:

> Now that the economy is really picking up again, and now that people are going to have more choices when it comes to employment, I think companies that have a lot of emotional intelligence and whose leaders are focused on the people side of the business, will be the types of companies that are going to be successful. I say that because every person is going to have a choice of where they want to work. It's getting more and more competitive out there. Specifically in our industry, there's already a war on talent. So, the leaders that can relate to their employees are going to be the ones that are going to keep them. When companies lose employees, it can cost a lot of money and can be really hard on the firm. So having people who are here for the long term and focusing on continuing to build relationships with them is going to be really important in remaining a stable, viable, and successful organization.

If we want to keep our workers happy, engaged, motivated, and enthusiastic about their jobs, our leaders must offer a continual sense of connection, support, and consideration through their daily behaviors. Empathetic leadership plays a fundamental role in attracting, developing, and retaining organizational talent. Because empathy is a central component of emotional intelligence, and because emotional intelligence has been credited as an essential aspect of effective leadership, one can arguably claim that empathy is critical for 21st century leadership and beyond. Through empathy, leaders can transform, inspire, and empower organizations for the common good.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A wealth of knowledge, expertise, and insights regarding contemporary leadership emerged throughout the interview processes. However, with a plethora of rich quotations, and faced with the decision to choose the most applicable statements, the capacity to include all of the rich quotations in the present study was not a possibility.   The challenge to limit the most suitable data statements to the parameters of this study is, nevertheless, promising in the potential for future research endeavors. As a qualitative research design, this study had the capacity to yield rich, valuable insights for inclusion in the field of leadership studies, but there are many more potential avenues for exploration. A single case study, for example, could generate a deeper understanding of one's organizational culture and his or her practice of empathetic leadership. While the interviews lasted no longer than an hour, the intriguing discussions in several interviews could have certainly continued far beyond the sixty-minute time frame, thus indicating the potential for a single case study on leader empathy.

Additionally, my goals to recruit more women for a female perspective on leadership did not come to fruition because of scheduling conflicts. While scholarship may argue that only a handful of women out of eighteen total interviewees may limit the results of the study, it, in hindsight, metonymically yields stronger evidence that empathy is ever more recognizable in today's corporate leadership.   The study as it stands is robust: the general conclusion, regardless of the number of women, was that empathy is perceived as an important trait for successful leadership. Because women stereotypically possess stronger empathetic qualities than men, the inclusion of more women may have generated even stronger evidence of the current argument. Further research then, could explore the gender differences in the perspectives of empathetic leadership. A further investigation of any congruent gender perspectives regarding soft skills in

63

leadership is ripe for future study. Nonetheless, the testimonials in this study are strong

indication that empathy is an essential trait, across the board, in contemporary leadership.

In terms of social desirability bias, the sole focus on leaders' responses in this study may

be seen as a limitation. Further investigations could consider analyzing and aligning responses

from both leaders *and* subordinates in the same organizations. However, because many prior

studies have analyzed variables focusing on workers' preferences and perceptions of leader

effectiveness and its influence on their job satisfaction and work outcomes, it was necessary to

explore the extent to which leaders themselves view the importance of a particular trait in their

own leadership practices. Nonetheless, this opens the door for further qualitative analysis of

soft-skilled leadership, such as textual analysis of employee diaries or surveys based upon their

job experiences.

There are several additional options for future research. One significant revelation for

future exploration is in relation to one leader's—David Greer—emphasis on "doing the right

thing." While Greer was the first to mention that leaders "who do the right thing" are the most

effective, many participants' responses regarding their perspectives were embedded with a sense

of moral, or ethical, responsibility. Like personal philosophies generally influence the way

individuals approach particular circumstances, leadership styles likely function in similar ways.

Recall from the literature review that Miller (2009) calls for "love" in leadership, encouraging

how faith-based morals should be implemented in work lives as well in our social lives.

Interestingly, after an interview with Rick Martin, I noticed several Bible quotes on the wall

throughout the office, suggesting that their work culture is rooted in moral values. Moral

upbringings may certainly influence one's leadership practices and perspectives, and an

investigation on spirituality in the workplace is a promising avenue for future research, whether

it is carried out in a single case study or a general exploration of leaders' morality and its influence on leadership practices.

Next, in regards to the leaders' enthusiasm about quantitative success measures, this enthusiasm reveals the aspect of human nature. As a representative sample, these 18 leaders show a typical, common excitement about positive quantitative results. Humans typically respond favorably to numbers in order to learn what areas need improvement and what areas are prosperous. For instance, consider education. Is not students' learning and development primarily measured by a point system? Quantitative measures are tangible, understandable data of the quality of performance. For instance, organizational employees often utilize SMART goals for how to measure their progress. SMART stands for a goal that is specific, *measurable*, *attainable*, relevant, and timely. If, in regards to relational leadership skills like empathy, leaders have no alternative viable method for measuring, attaining, or reaching their specific goals in a timely manner, the quality of their organizational relationship development could not be understood. Tangible measures are necessary in order to determine if leaders' actions and behaviors are effective. Therefore, scholars might consider delving deeper into why leaders and organizations feel the need to calculate or explain the relationship to their employees in quantifiable terms.

Lastly, regarding the several themes that emerged in this study, another future scholarly endeavor might replicate or extend the current study to discover if similar themes transpire or if others diverge. Another study could further explore each of the present themes in this study. For instance, one study might investigate the omnipresent use of technology and its correlation to empathetic leadership. Still yet, are opportunities to further investigate the generational aspects of workers and workers' expectations for corporate leadership qualities. Furthermore,

65

corresponding to RQ2, organizational success measures could be further explored in their relationship to empathetic leadership qualities. The volume of possible directions for further research is promising. The all-encompassing area of leadership thus continues to be a crucial area for study in an ever-evolving, dynamic society.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your title? How many employees do you supervise? What are their primary tasks?

2. How long have you held a leadership position?

3. What is the mission of your organization?

   a. Explain how you strive to make your leadership style congruent with the mission of the organization.

4. How would you describe your leadership style? *(Look for responses based on relationships with employees or emotional skills like empathy. Also look for responses that reflect a congruency with the mission of the organization)*

5. How important is it that you have a strong relationship with your subordinates? What makes for a "strong" relationship?

6. How would you describe your relationship with your employees?

7. How do you build positive relationships with your subordinates?

8. How, if at all, do you promote a culture of connection with your employees? *Explain that the following questions will focus on their daily interaction with employees in regards to their relationship to a culture of connection.*

   a. Do you ever notice that one or more of your subordinates is having a "bad day?" How did you respond to those situations?

   b. Have your subordinates ever come to you with personal issues they want to discuss? If so, can you describe an example of how that discussion went, and how you responded? Do you think your employee left satisfied, or helped in some way?

c. Do your subordinates ever come to you with complaints about their work? Can you share an example of how the discussion transpired, and what your responses were?

9. *If relevant*: How important do you think it is to deal with emotional matters in terms of productivity for your team?

10. *If relevant*: Are there personal or emotional issues you do not think are appropriate for you, or any leader, to deal with on the job?

11. Do you perceive a link, if any, between having relational skills with employees and overall work productivity?

   a. *If relevant* Do you feel that your relationship skills are a motivating factor in the productivity of your employees? Can you explain or describe a scenario where particular emotion-oriented skills are employed by you or other leaders to enhance the work environment?

12. What training workshops, if any, does your organization employ regarding important relational skills among leaders and coworkers?

13. Have you experienced any change in the demands of leadership, especially as it relates to dealing with employees' emotional needs or desire for connection?

14. How do you foresee leadership traits based on relational skills—or emotional intelligence—as having a significant influence on organizational outcomes?

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