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What Makes Informal Leaders Tick? An Examination of Their Leadership Experience

Marie T. Fazio
University of Pennsylvania, mtbfazio@gmail.com

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Abstract

Although research about informal leadership continues to expand, there is still a lack of understanding about the role of the informal leader and their leadership experience. This Capstone seeks to understand informal leadership directly from informal leaders, which is currently a gap in the literature. My research question, "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?*" is examined in this exploratory study. A qualitative research methodology was used as the framework for 18 semi-structured interviews of the informal leader participants. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. Thematic coding was used to analyze the interview data. The prominent themes from the data indicated that formal leaders exert influence on informal leaders in ways that informal leaders consider to be at times supportive and positive, and at other times undermining. Informal leaders are motivated by feeling that they are contributing to the greater good of the organization. Informal leaders are often viewed as the "go-to" person and this can be satisfying, risky, or both. The study found that although informal leaders find aspects of informal leadership challenging, in some cases due to lack of support for or clarity about their role, they also want to learn more about this form of leadership. Curiosity about this form of leadership from informal leaders is spurred by their interest in knowing more about their leadership style, as well as the ability to identify other informal leaders. Additionally, informal leaders often play a central and positive role in organizations due to their ability to collaborate, form relationships, and work across multiple levels of the enterprise.

WHAT MAKES INFORMAL LEADERS TICK?

AN EXAMINATION OF THEIR LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

by

Marie T. Fazio

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
in the School of Arts and Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2020

WHAT MAKES INFORMAL LEADERS TICK?

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Approved by:

Dana Kaminstein, Ph.D., Advisor

Janet Greco, Ph.D., Reader

ABSTRACT

Although research about informal leadership continues to expand, there is still a lack of understanding about the role of the informal leader and their leadership experience. This Capstone seeks to understand informal leadership directly from informal leaders, which is currently a gap in the literature. My research question, *"How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?"* is examined in this exploratory study. A qualitative research methodology was used as the framework for 18 semi-structured interviews of the informal leader participants. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. Thematic coding was used to analyze the interview data. The prominent themes from the data indicated that formal leaders exert influence on informal leaders in ways that informal leaders consider to be at times supportive and positive, and at other times undermining. Informal leaders are motivated by feeling that they are contributing to the greater good of the organization. Informal leaders are often viewed as the "go-to" person and this can be satisfying, risky, or both. The study found that although informal leaders find aspects of informal leadership challenging, in some cases due to lack of support for or clarity about their role, they also want to learn more about this form of leadership. Curiosity about this form of leadership from informal leaders is spurred by their interest in knowing more about their leadership style, as well as the ability to identify other informal leaders. Additionally, informal leaders often play a central and positive role in organizations due to their ability to collaborate, form relationships, and work across multiple levels of the enterprise.

Keywords: Leadership, informal leader, informal leadership, formal leader, formal leadership, distributed leadership

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

<u>Capstone Topic</u>

This Capstone examines informal leaders and their leadership, specifically how and why these individuals are motivated to take on these roles. My approach to learning about informal leaders—who they are, their motivations and why they do what they do—is firsthand, from them. This exploratory study looks at understanding the views informal leaders have of themselves in this role and captures their leadership lessons and stories.

This Chapter provides an overview of the rationale for this Capstone, including background information about informal leadership and its significance in the study of leadership. I discuss the significance of this topic to me and my assumptions as I began this project. Also, I provide an overview of the key themes from the literature review, as well as discuss the research methodology. This chapter will serve as a guide to the Capstone.

<u>Background/Context</u>

"Leadership" is a word that is often used but not necessarily completely understood. When someone says "leadership," they are often referring to formal leadership, which can be understood as an assigned position of authority with accountability for that role (Miner, 2013). Often leadership research focuses on these designated, formal roles (Wheelan & Johnston, 1996). Despite this focus, most organizations only have a limited number of formal leadership roles available. From both a workforce and organizational perspective, understanding the role of the informal leader and informal leadership can be mutually beneficial to the employee and the organization.

Research about informal leadership has been slow to evolve, but it is an area of growing interest and research (Downey, Parslow, & Smart, 2011; Krueger, 2013; Miner, 2013; Ng'ambi & Bozalek, 2013; Pielstick, 2000; Shaughnessy, Treadway, Breland, & Perrewé, 2017; Smart, 2010; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014).

Importance of the Topic

Based on current research studies, a better understanding of informal leadership is needed. As Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) argue, this increasing interest in informal leaders reflects an organizational shift. No longer can companies develop and rely on leaders purely based on a one-dimensional organizational chart. Doyle (2002) states that leadership occurs at every level of the organization, both formally and informally. Not only do informal leaders have distinctive leadership qualities (Smart, 2010), but also, as Neubert (1999) explains, informal leaders play an important role on teams, including influencing how the team functions and performs. Manz and Sims (1984) relate that as organizations shift "work design" and autonomy and decentralization increase, along with greater and more ambiguous workloads for supervisors, more information about informal leaders and leaders *within* teams would provide organizational insight. Specifically, Manz and Sims (1984) refer to the "'unleader' as one who leads others to lead themselves" (p. 411). Cohen, Ledford and Spreitzer (1996) note the value of internal or informal leadership as having a positive impact on the effectiveness of self-managing work teams. Ultimately, informal leaders work across organizations (Smart, 2010). Based on my professional experience, their influence and impact can be meaningful. Yet, there is more to learn about who they are as individuals and leaders.

The healthcare field is more familiar with the concept of informal leadership than other industries according to the literature. This may be based on necessity; specifically, the rapid pace at which healthcare moves and the demands of patient care rely on the agility of cross-functional teams (Lawson, Tecson, Shaver, Barnes & Kavli, 2018). The demands of the healthcare field have enabled informal leaders to emerge and ultimately be recognized by their peers and supervisors (Lawson et al., 2018). In summary, as the landscape of modern work continues to evolve and the demands on organizations and supervisors increase, there is growing interest in the role of the informal leaders.

Importance of the Topic to Me

I initially became interested in the topic in my first class in the Organizational Dynamics program, DYNM 501, with Dr. Janet Greco. For one of my memos, I explained that I was a student of the "fake it til you make it" school of leadership. Over time, and through my education, I've realized that what I was referring to is a mix of my qualities, motivating factors and aspirations, which have made me an informal leader in different aspects of my life, including organizationally. I reflect and think about what made me want to step up and assume these roles. When I look at my own motives and motivations, it feels like something I am compelled to do. It's not an option. It's the way I'm wired and it's who I've become based on my life experience.

Simultaneously, I've had opportunities present themselves for me to assume informal leadership roles, along with supportive groups and teams who enabled me to do so. I've also created my own leadership opportunities by volunteering for tasks or offering to step in when others chose not to. Based on my career path, the informal

leadership experience can be multi-dimensional with a mix of individual effort and professional opportunities as part of this leadership process.

This experience has led me to ask, what about other informal leaders? Is their experience the same as mine? Or vastly different? I want to find out. Does an individual's characteristics and motivation lead to their stepping up as an informal leader? Or is this designation driven by others such as the members of a group or team? Do circumstances rather than individual characteristics create this opportunity? What makes them "tick"? What lessons can we learn from their experiences? What insights do they have to offer? In summary, my goal for this Capstone is twofold: 1. To offer new insights on the topic of informal leadership and 2. To fill some of the existing gaps in the current literature.

Literature

The research about informal leaders has been lacking, but it is beginning to expand (Downey, Parslow, & Smart, 2011; Krueger, 2013; Miner, 2013; Ng'ambi & Bozalek, 2013; Pielstick, 2000; Shaughnessy, Treadway, Breland, & Perrewé, 2017; Smart, 2010; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). Based on my research, many of the articles discuss informal leadership in healthcare, primarily nursing, but recognition of informal leadership in other fields is beginning to emerge (Downey et al., 2011; Hills, 2014; Krueger, 2013; Lawson et al., 2018; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Ross, 2014).

My research question, "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?*" is driven by my own interest and a gap in the literature. The primary focus of most research is on the role of informal leaders in organizations and/or small groups rather than the informal leader as an individual. For example, Pielstick (2000) observes that little research has been done on informal leadership in *organizations*

compared to *small groups*. Pielstick (2000) used a survey to better understand the characteristics of formal and informal leaders. Conversely, Wheelan and Johnston's (1996) research focuses on *small groups*. Their exploratory study examines the power of words in informal and formal leader groups.

Pescosolido (2001) examines the development of group efficacy and the role of informal leaders. This research also references the group work of Wheelan and Johnston (1996) and the role of verbal persuasion in groups. Unlike the previous two publications, Pescosolido focuses on informal leaders *only*. There is no comparison or contrast to formal leaders nor firsthand accounts from informal leaders.

My review of the literature for this Capstone highlights some significant aspects of informal leadership for consideration and future research. The following four themes, which emerged from the literature and are closely related to my research question, will be discussed in depth in the literature review.

Distributed Leadership as a Model that Include Informal Leaders

Distributed leadership is often referred to as "shared," "collective," "collaborative," and "democratic" leadership (Bolden, 2011). Although there may not be an obvious connection in the literature between distributed and informal leadership, I argue that informal leadership falls under the distributed leadership model. Both distributed and informal leadership consider the leadership contributions of employees across the organization, not only those with formal leadership titles. The literature review examines this possible connection between these forms of leadership further.

The Definition of Informal Leadership

To better understand informal leadership from informal leaders, it is essential to establish a common definition of informal leadership from across the literature. The guiding definition of informal leadership for this Capstone is: "informal leaders are individuals without formal title or authority who serve as advocates for the organization or heighten the contributions of others as well as their own, primarily through influence, relationship-building, knowledge, and expertise" (Smart, 2010, p. 28). I expand the definition of informal leadership by considering other aspects of informal leadership discussed in the literature, including no formal authority, the duality of formal and informal leadership, the role of teams in informal leadership, the influence of informal leaders, and the expertise of informal leaders.

The Attributes of Informal Leaders

To understand informal leadership directly from informal leaders also requires an understanding of their characteristics. Researchers Hills (2014) and Smart (2010) address some of the characteristics in their work, but, in general, this area has not been well explored in informal leadership. I propose the following nuanced areas for review to learn more about individual informal leaders, including leadership emergence, formal leadership aspirations, and other unique considerations impacting informal leaders such as organizational culture.

The Value of Informal Leaders in Organizations

Taking my bias toward informal leaders into consideration, in this section of the literature review I discuss both the positive and negative influences of informal leaders in organizations. The positive contributions of informal leaders manifest in healthcare in

fast-paced demanding environments, in which there is little time for micromanagement in life-saving situations (Lawson et al., 2018). Other examples include the role of informal leaders on teams (Doyle, 2002) and across the organization (Smart, 2010).

The negative impact of informal leaders can be seen when they are in opposition to formal leaders (Krueger, 2013; Hill, 2014). Challenges with informal leaders can also manifest during periods of change management in which informal leaders may serve as resistors and ultimately influence colleagues in a negative way (Krueger, 2013).

In summary, the current literature provides an adequate foundation to learn about informal leaders and informal leadership. However, the next level of learning comes from understanding the informal leadership experience directly from informal leaders. The gaps I have identified in the literature, including examining the connection between distributed and informal leadership, establishing a comprehensive definition of informal leadership, understanding the characteristics of informal leaders, and assessing their organizational impact will be discussed further in the literature review.

<u>Research</u>

My research question, *"How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?"* illuminates a different aspect of informal leadership. It differs from the current research because it is examining informal leadership from an individual perspective rather than from the small group or organizational level. This project may provide both organizations and individuals with insight about the role of informal leadership.

Assumptions

Perhaps due to my experience with informal leadership, my bias is towards informal leaders both in terms of who they are as individuals and leaders, as well as their organizational impact. More specifically, I began this exploratory study with several assumptions about informal leaders, which include:

1. Informal leaders share common characteristics. I also assume that they share similar motivations. I'm assuming that even more than the characteristics they share, informal leaders are primarily self-motivated rather than motivated by obligation or opportunity. Informal leaders are aware of and understand that they are in an informal leadership role.

2. Informal leaders see value in taking a risk to assume a role that's not formally recognized.

3. Informal leaders make a conscious decision to be an informal leader by their words and/or actions.

4. Informal leaders feel some level of self-satisfaction in their role.

5. Informal leaders are ultimately not content in their unofficial roles, and they seek formal leadership positions as an end goal.

As I completed both the literature review and interview process, it was essential to check my assumptions against the current research and the new knowledge gained from interviewing informal leaders. Awareness of these assumptions is the first step in managing my bias.

Throughout this Capstone journey, I have had my assumptions challenged and dispelled, both through the literature review and the interview process. My greatest

learning to date has been having my biases revealed and challenged, leading me to better understand the importance of a balanced research perspective. Reviewing the literature and conversing with others about this topic has exposed me to divergent ideas and aspects of informal leadership that I haven't considered before. The prospect of what my research may reveal to others is motivating and exciting.

Research Method

This exploratory study used a qualitative research methodology. Given that the aim of this Capstone is to understand informal leadership directly from informal leaders, the qualitative research approach offered an ideal framework.

The research method was semi-structured interviews. Eighteen interviews were conducted. The semi-structured interview format provided firsthand insight into the knowledge and experience of the interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), which is lacking in the current literature.

Research Sample

Purposeful sampling was used to fulfill the participant criteria. Recruitment was done at both Drexel University and the Organizational Dynamics Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Once a few participants were identified through my network, snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants who had interests relevant to this research area (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The initial participant recruitment goal was 10-12 interviewees, but there were 18 total participants in the study.

Results & Data Analysis

In total, 18 interviews were conducted. Seventeen of the 18 interviews were recorded. In addition, I kept notes for each interview, a process recommended by

Maguire and Delahunt (2017). Thematic coding was used to analyze the interview transcripts.

      In summary, a qualitative research methodology with a semi-structured interview format provided the research structure for this Capstone. Purposeful and snowball sampling were essential in participant recruitment and selection from both Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania. Face-to-face interviews were transcribed and then coded.

<u>Overview of Capstone</u>

This Capstone has four chapters, in addition to the Introduction, which are:

Chapter 2: Literature Review

      The literature review will include definitions of informal leadership in the leadership research. It will also discuss and compare some of the dominant themes in the informal leadership research, as well as discuss the existing gaps in the literature.

Chapter 3: Methodology

      This chapter covers the exploratory qualitative research methodology employed in this study, as well as the use of purposeful and snowball sampling. This chapter also includes a discussion of the participant sample, recruitment, semi-structured interview format as well as the interview coding.

Chapter 4: Results

      This chapter will discuss the demographics of the participants and the results of the interviews. The dominant research themes that emerged will also be described.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis & Conclusion

This chapter will review the themes that emerged from the interview results and examine them through the framework of the current literature and my analysis. It will also discuss any unexpected results in the data, the limitations of the study, practice implications, and recommendations for future research. I continue to monitor how I am managing my biases throughout the research process.

In addition, this chapter will conclude the Capstone through reflection and discussion of the research process and the new learning that has emerged. This also includes possible next steps for continued informal leadership research. Lastly, I'll summarize the impact of the Capstone experience for me and the lessons learned.

Conclusion

One of the primary goals of this Capstone is to gain new knowledge about informal leaders, from informal leaders. It is my hope that the data will contribute to the breadth and depth of the existing research about informal leaders and their role.

This Capstone may also be relevant to anyone in an organization from entry level to the C-suite. Most specifically, it may help those in formal leadership roles who have a position of authority, and those who may be at entry or mid-level organizational positions, who want to better understand the impact of their organizational influence. Those in formal positions may gain a better understanding of the role of the informal leader, including recognizing and cultivating informal leadership roles within their organization. For those at a career entry point or mid-level, they may be able to better recognize their own informal leadership skills. If they are currently in an informal role, they may be able to capitalize on that position to help the organization and themselves.

This Capstone may also assist organizations to better understand what the "profile" of an informal leader is and how they can impact both the organization and their individual role.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

<u>Introduction</u>

The awareness about the role of informal leaders and the literature surrounding this subject continues to expand, as some leadership researchers have begun to identify the informal leader role in their work. Yet, multiple studies talk about the lack of research on this topic (Downey, Parslow, & Smart, 2011; Krueger, 2013; Miner, 2013; Ng'ambi & Bozalek, 2013; Pielstick, 2000; Shaughnessy, Treadway, Breland, & Perrewé, 2017; Smart, 2010; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). Historically, informal leadership research has focused on small groups rather than organizations (Miner, 2013; Pielstick, 2000). The continued need for research about informal leaders is at a critical point as organizations evolve. Managers are being asked to take on additional responsibility, with more direct reports, while often reporting to multiple supervisors (Hill, 2004). Increasingly, leadership skills are being sought at each level of the organization, not only the C-suite (Burns, 1978; Hills, 2014; Miner, 2013; Pescosolido, 2001; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Pielstick, 2000; Ross, 2014; Smart, 2010; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014).

Hills (2014) argues that a company's organizational chart easily identifies the formal leaders, but it only presents one organizational perspective. She describes informal leadership as a "complementary leadership model" (p. 197). Doyle (2002) and Smart (2010) go on to say that the leadership model has changed in that formal, authoritative leaders are no longer the only source of leadership company wide. The expectation now is that leaders are distributed across the organization in both formal and informal roles. In summary, much of the literature talks about formal leaders and neglects

informal leaders. This literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of the informal leader with a focus on their unique perspective of their leadership experience.

My research question is, "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?"* It focuses on understanding informal leadership from the perspective of the informal leader rather than from the perspective of the formal leader. The lens that informal leadership is often viewed through is the formal leader's view. Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) observe that there is a general gap in the literature, as the studies "have not identified clearly the qualities that characterize informal leadership based on the perceptions and perspectives of individuals who have observed or experienced informal leadership" (p. 2). Stincelli and Baghurst also argue that organizations, in general, and formal leaders, specifically, need to better understand the qualities of informal leaders to efficiently and effectively utilize and apply their skills. Informal leaders are a potential untapped resource, but the only way to determine this is to learn more about them and their leadership.

This literature review will examine the following aspects of informal leadership, which emerged from the review of the literature and are most closely related to my research question: (a) distributed leadership as a model that includes informal leaders, (b) the definition(s) of informal leadership, (c) attributes of informal leaders, and (d) the value of informal leaders in organizations. Each section covers a fundamental aspect of the characteristics of informal leaders, as well as gaps in the literature.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership has its foundation in the field of education, specifically in schools, and more so in the United Kingdom than in the United States (Bolden, 2011). Starting in the year 2000, distributed leadership became a more widely recognized,

researched and discussed concept in the leadership literature (Bolden, 2011). Per Bolden

(2011), other terms used to describe distributed leadership may include "shared,"

"collective," "collaborative," and "democratic" leadership, to name a few.

For the purposes of this Capstone, distributed leadership serves as an overarching

model that encompasses the role of informal leaders and characteristics of informal

leadership. Gone are the days of "command and control" leadership (Harris & Spillane,

2008; Smart, 2010; Zhu, Liao, Yam, & Johnson, 2018) with the formal leader as "hero"

(Zhu et al., 2018). As Zhu et al. (2018) explain about the current view of distributed

leadership, "leadership roles and influence are distributed among team members" (p.

834). Everyone's contribution to the practice of leadership in the organization is

acknowledged (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Distributed leadership highlights some of the

strongest areas and most organizationally beneficial parts of informal leadership.

Specifically, distributed leadership examines/considers the role of *leadership practice,*

which is "how leadership influences organizational instructional improvement" (Harris &

Spillane, 2008). This encompasses the qualitative nature of informal leadership, as it

speaks to the importance of relationships, influence, and teamwork (Krueger, 2013), as

well as the presence of informal leaders in virtually every organization (Peters &

O'Connor, 2001). Theoretically, distributed leadership and informal leadership are

accessible forms of leadership in every organization and to every employee since neither

requires formal roles nor titles to be effective.

However, in some ways, the concept of distributed leadership is still loosely

defined (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003). Bennett et al. (2003) note that the

existing definitions of distributed leadership are disparate, and, as such, they explain that

it's possible to identify distinctive elements of distributed leadership. Still, even within those elements, there may be differences or inconsistencies of meaning. The closest these authors come to a definition of distributed leadership is "leadership as the product of concertive or conjoint activity emphasizing it as an emergent property of a group or network—which will underpin it" (p. 7).

Additionally, based on the literature, the connection between distributed leadership and informal leadership may not be obvious at first. In the articles by Bolden (2011) and Bennett et al. (2003), informal leadership is only mentioned a few times. In the annotated bibliography about distributed leadership by Spillane and Mertz (2017), informal leadership is not mentioned at all. In a study completed by Bennett et al. (2003) on behalf of the National College for School Leadership (2003) related leadership concepts include at least 14 other terms, among which informal leadership is not included. Despite this, I am convinced that there is a connection between the two forms of leadership and more research on distributed leadership and its intersection with informal leadership is needed.

In summary, researchers have identified distributed leadership as a shared or collective approach to leadership accessible to everyone in the organization. These characteristics are complimentary with the work of informal leaders. Further research on both distributed leadership and informal leadership may lead to a greater connection between these two types of leadership.

Definitions of Informal Leadership

Simply put, an informal leader can be defined as a version of a formal leader without the same level of authority and accountability (Miner, 2013; Pielstick, 2000). Although this simplistic definition may be true, a survey of the literature reveals

characteristics of the informal leaders' role are more complex than this. Specifically, key aspects of the definition of informal leadership include no formal authority, a team-based role, influence, and expertise.

No Formal Authority

Traditionally speaking, lack of formal authority is one of the fundamental tenants of informal leadership based on the literature. It is generally accepted that an informal leader is someone who does not possess formal authority or a formal leadership position (Hills, 2014; Ross, 2014; Pielstick, 2000; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). Pescosolido (2001) goes on to say more specifically "the informal leader does not hold the power of hiring and firing," a function that is a clear indication of authority (p. 78). Along with no formal authority, as Hills explains, the leadership of an informal leader may not be intentional as compared to a formal leader, who is in an appointed, officially recognized authoritative position. Pielstick (2000) argues that although informal leaders may lack formal title and authority, they share characteristics that formal leaders possess and are still recognized as leaders.

Additionally, there isn't a significant amount of research that compares the roles of formal and informal leaders. However, Pielstick (2000) set out to better understand both groups. Pielstick's (2000) research used a mail survey to measure feedback about the characteristics of formal versus informal leaders. The characteristics were defined as a "leader profile" in earlier work by Pielstick under the category of "authentic leading." The characteristics identified six areas (with 161 variables): shared vision, communication, relationships, community, guidance, and character. The author's analysis of the survey and related research is that in most of these areas, counter to his null

hypotheses, informal leaders show greater proficiency and strength as leaders than formal leaders, despite their lack of formal authority. It is important to note, however, that Pielstick in this research does have a bias towards informal leaders, which reveals itself throughout the study.

Consider the Duality of Formal and Informal Leadership

An aspect of informal leadership that the literature doesn't discuss at length is the possibility of being a formal and informal leader at the same time. Only Oh, Labianca and Chung (2006) and Wren (2005) acknowledge this leadership dynamic. Oh et al. (2006) posit that formal and informal leadership capabilities are knitted together and both sets of skills enhance leadership ability. Conversely, Wren argues that it is possible to be one leader with both sets of capabilities, but only if the formal leader serves in an informal capacity with a team for which they don't have supervisory responsibility. Only then can an individual serve as both a formal and informal leader.

Similar to Wren, I, too, argue that it is possible to have a dual role as both a formal and informal leader, having seen this firsthand. As more organizations move to project- and team-based structures, circumstances may exist in which a formal leader with direct reports is also managing a team in which they may be responsible for the content development and advancing the project, but the team members are not their direct reports. This is known as leading with ambiguous authority. It is a more dynamic application of the informal leader role than specifically limiting those capabilities to only those without formal authority.

In addition, I also believe that formal leaders tap into aspects of informal leadership even though they have formal authority. Often formal leaders are outranked

within their peer group, by colleagues, or by members of the executive team. The role of informal influence and expertise in these circumstances could use further study. Currently, this dual leadership role is only marginally discussed in the literature.

Team Based

The healthcare field is essential to consult for their definition of an informal leader. This field, more than any I have encountered to date, works to identify and foster informal leaders. This healthcare-based understanding and appreciation of informal leaders is directly related to the nature of the work, primarily because it is *team based*. Informal leaders and their role on teams is a central recurring theme in the definition of informal leadership.

In addition, as Lee and Cummings (2008) explain, as healthcare organizations become larger and more complex, power and influence are not only held by those in management positions, but also those without formal titles, or informal leaders. These informal leaders impact the quality of patient care.

Lawson, Tecson, Shaver, Barnes, and Kavli (2018) note that in healthcare "the team framework is the primary vehicle for the delivery of patient care" (p. 2). This framework requires a complex level of coordination and integration across clinical and technical disciplines: "Often the cornerstone of the team stands as a nurse, possibly an informal leader, who directly or indirectly guides the processes" (p. 2).

Based on my research, the healthcare field is ahead of traditional formal organizations in their recognition and promotion of the informal leader role. Some explanation of this emphasis could be found by studying formal and informal organizations. Based on organizational charts, most healthcare organizations would be

considered formal organizations; however, as Lawson et al. (2018) discuss, the level of "complexity" demands leadership that expands beyond formal authority. Smart (2010) describes the informal organization as "behind the scenes" (p. 73). More specifically, "the informal organization is the natural ordering and structuring that evolves from the needs of the participants as they interact in the workplace" (p. 73). I would argue that in healthcare it's the participants (employees as caregivers) and the patients who drive the interactions which necessitate the informal leadership roles to span boundaries and gaps.

As Smart (2010) explains, informal leaders can execute. Specifically, she refers to them as "the primary agents of execution" (p. 39) and "facilitators of action" (p. 40). They are the ultimate boundary spanners and gap fillers, which aligns well with the rapid pace of the healthcare model. In life-and-death situations, protocols must be followed, but there isn't time to ask for approval or permission to act. As part of a team, informal leaders not only have the expertise to do the work, but also the experience to see the big picture (Smart, 2010). This balance provides support to both the team and the formal leaders.

The role of teams in the formation of informal leaders in organizations, including healthcare and beyond, is acknowledged by several researchers (Carte et al., 2006; Wheelan & Johnston, 1996). As Krueger (2013) asserts, "this type of leader influences the group, comes from the team, and is chosen by the team" (para. 4). This explanation supports the position that the development of the informal leader is a team-based, organic process. As Carte et al. (2006) further explain, in the context of self-managed teams, often the team relies on the emergence of an informal leader. This leader assumes the

informal leadership role with the support of the team. The team, those responsible for completing the work, are best able to determine who is most qualified for this role.

Overall, the literature highlights the impact of groups and teams in the creation and acknowledgment of informal leaders. However, this raises the question: Are groups and teams needed to make this informal leadership determination? What is not discussed by these authors as part of their definition of informal leadership is the emergence of individuals as informal leaders. Further study is needed concerning the evaluation of the emergence of informal leadership qualities in the individual. The literature discusses the role of teams with informal leaders. The next level consideration is, are team dynamics essential for informal leaders to emerge?

Role of Influence

The role of influence of informal leaders was a component of a few definitions. In fact, Peters and O'Connor (2001) refer to informal leaders as "informal influence leaders." Influence denotes the ability of informal leaders to impact their peers and colleagues in some way (Hills, 2014; Pescosolido, 2001; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014; Schneier & Goktepe, 1983). At the heart of influence, and unique from definitions of formal leaders, is the focus on the relationships cultivated and fostered by the informal leader (Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). Through relationships, informal leaders can positively or negatively influence their colleagues (Hills, 2014; Krueger, 2013). Current-day organizational structure changes further support this emphasis on relationship development. Harris (2011) notes leadership has shifted from strictly positional to interaction based, which relies on relationships to make it work. Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) dissect the role of influence even further by explaining "the significant difference

between these two forms of leadership is that formal leadership often exerts influence through the use of authority while informal leadership influences others through the building of relationships and gaining respect" (Stincelli & Baghurst, p. 6).

The work of Cohen and Bradford (2001), specifically the Cohen-Bradford Influence Model, encapsulates the concept of influence without authority, as an organizational concept. The creators do not relate influence without authority directly to informal leadership. Interestingly, the role of influence in this model draws parallels to informal leadership. For example, as the authors discuss, "'the law of reciprocity'—the almost universal belief that people should be paid back for what they do, that one good (or bad) deed deserves another" (p. 7). The literature does discuss the value of recognizing and rewarding informal leaders (Downey, Parslow, & Smart, 2011; Smart, 2010). However, based on the literature, rather than being "paid back," the focus of influence for informal leaders is often based in the value they find in establishing and maintaining relationships (Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014).

Pescosolido's (2001) research about informal leaders and group efficacy adds another dimension to the role of influence—a timeline of effectiveness. Based on Pescosolido's work, he hypothesized that informal leaders are most effective during group formation. He argues that it's at the early stages of a group that the influence of an informal leader, along with reliance on them by the group, is strongest. This influence may be due to general lack of information and organization at the start of a project. However, as the group begins to work together, members become more self-reliant and informed about a task and, consequently, the role of the informal leader and their influence may diminish. This hypothesis was proven in Pescosolido's study of 120 MBA

students at a Midwest university. The students were observed at the beginning and end of the semester. After each meeting, students completed a questionnaire. Despite the limitations of the study, Pescosolido's hypothesis was proven with his sample and essentially, "these results suggest that the role of the informal group leader changes over time" (p. 91). This is further supported by the work of Krueger (2013) who explains that as the group experiences success on their own, the informal leader may become less influential.

The literature establishes the importance of influence and its connection to the role of the informal leader. Aspects that are lacking in the discussion include the foundation for cultivating influence. How does one go about establishing or cultivating influence? Is it solely based on relationships? How does influence translate to action? Is an informal leadership role possible without "followers" or is it purely relationship based? Most of the authors address the role of relationships from a positive perspective. What if the formative relationships deteriorate? Do challenging or negative relationships serve as a barrier to informal leadership emergence or can informal leadership emerge despite this? Essentially, is there a cause-and-effect loop in which one becomes or is considered an informal leader, which enables them to cultivate the relationship or are relationships a fundamental building block of informal leadership? Further analysis is needed.

Expertise

The discussion of the significance of expertise in the definition of informal leadership is touched on by some authors, but the research is not as fully developed as other aspects of informal leadership. Often informal leaders are referred to as "go-to"

people, but how this is quantified is not clearly discussed (Ross, 2014). Knowledge and skill would seem to be inherent in that classification. Smart (2010) explains that a criterion for expertise in an informal leader is that "they have a wealth of process information or technical information gained from experience" (p. 28). Although this may be true, the challenge with Smart's criteria is that it is one dimensional. Smart's explanation of expertise does not seem particularly specific to informal leadership. Further, does experience and technical knowledge alone make someone an informal leader? Based on the existing research, the answer is no. In the world of informal leadership, "expertise" is more complex.

A study by Lawson et al. (2018) of floor nurses in non-leadership positions in one health system across 14 hospitals in north and central Texas rated the leadership behaviors of their colleagues in an online survey. Nurses with formal leadership titles were excluded. Although the goal of the study was to evaluate informal leadership behaviors and patient satisfaction, one outcome was discovering that informal leaders had more years of experience and greater job satisfaction. The first phase of the survey collected demographic information and then questions related to job satisfaction. After that, survey respondents were asked to rate the leadership qualities of a randomized list of colleagues on a Likert scale of 0-10. Phase two of the survey targeted those who were identified as informal leaders in phase 1 by asking them questions about their leadership style.

One critique of the survey is that providing the randomized list of colleagues may have produced a different result than the opportunity to write in the names of those colleagues whom they think have leadership qualities. Additionally, survey results

showed that 18% of the respondents (628 of 3,456) were identified as having more years of professional experience and higher job satisfaction, as well as being considered informal leaders. This raises the question as to whether this percentage is significant enough to draw the correlation among professional experience, job satisfaction, and informal leadership qualities.

The significance of years of experience also relates back to the concept of distributed leadership and the shift from viewing leadership as a "position" to a "situation" or "interaction" (Harris, 2011; Hemphill, 1961). Both situational and interaction-based leadership intertwine with the role of the informal leader as an expert. Along with the importance of expertise, Harris (2011) explains that trust and expertise go hand in hand. Both expertise and trust are cultivated over time. In addition to trust, Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) further support that expertise (which they refer to as "competence") alone is not enough to make you an informal leader. What will contribute to informal leadership is the "willingness to demonstrate that competence" and doing so in a committed way. The informal leader can demonstrate competence through clear and supportive communication to their colleagues, which over time can help to establish reciprocal trust and respect for the informal leader as an expert in their given area (Lawson et al., 2018; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014).

Guiding Definition of Informal Leadership for this Capstone

For the purposes of this Capstone, my working definition of informal leadership and its essential aspects is from Smart (2010): "informal leaders are individuals without formal title or authority who serve as advocates for the organization and heighten the

contributions of others as well as their own, primarily through influence, relationship-building, knowledge and expertise" (p. 28).

This definition encompasses keys areas of informal leadership that will be discussed in this literature review and throughout this Capstone. This definition provides a framework to identify informal leaders while being malleable and open to the complexities of informal leadership.

In summary, definitions of informal leadership continue to evolve as does the complexity of the informal leadership role. Across the literature, core aspects of the definition of informal leadership include individuals with no formal title or authority. Also, informal leadership emergence is often organically rooted in teamwork, along with the ability of informal leaders to influence team members and other individuals in the organization, including formal leaders. Lastly, the impact of expertise and skill for those who emerge as informal leaders should be considered when identifying or mentoring possible informal leaders.

<u>Attributes of Informal Leaders</u>

According to Miner (2013) "the real difference between formal and informal leaders is the levels of accountability and authority" (p. 57). Traditionally, the "official" leadership title for the formal leader has been the primary difference between the formal and informal leadership roles. However, the concept of informal leadership demonstrates there's more to being a leader than a title. Hills (2014), based on her work with medical practice teams, and Smart (2010), based on her research, identify core characteristics of informal leaders, although they vary by individual. The qualities include the ability to serve as: relationship and community builders, communicators, influencers, coordinators, negotiators, enablers, motivators, and overall organizational catalysts.

Downey et al. (2011), using the framework of informal leaders in nursing leadership roles, advise employers seeking to identify informal leaders on their teams to be observant of the same core characteristics on their teams. Additionally, managers should be mindful and observant of peer-to-peer interactions. Informal leaders are recognized as leaders by their colleagues and peers (Cross, Nohria, & Parker, 2002; Smart, 2010).

It could be argued that this list of attributes is a basic list of general leadership skills. However, there are unique aspects of informal leadership that set informal leaders apart from formal leaders. With evolving research about informal leadership, researchers have begun to identify the more nuanced attributes of informal leaders.

Emergent Leadership Development

Smart (2010) focuses on the characteristic of an informal leader as a leader who *emerges* from a team, with a focus on groups and networks. Smart goes on to describe the emergent, informal leader as a chameleon of sorts, able to adapt their skills to the needs of a situation or a group. As such, informal leaders are recognized as leaders by their colleagues and peers (Cross et al., 2002; Smart, 2010). The concept of emergent leadership could also indicate that informal leadership is a precursor to formal leadership. However, based on discussion by Hills (2014) and Downey et al. (2011), a guaranteed path to formal leadership may not be a given.

Formal Leadership Aspiration & Informal Leaders' Self-View

Notable in Hills' (2014) review of these informal leadership characteristics is her analysis of the question: Do informal leaders aspire to have a formal leadership role? Her answer is *maybe* or *maybe not*. "Informal leaders may or may not be intentionally trying

to lead" (p. 197). This action of leading may relate to the view informal leaders have of themselves, which is the focus of this Capstone and a topic only few researchers have addressed.

Downey et al. (2011) are one of the few authors in this literature review to examine how informal leaders view *themselves*, which directly relates to my research question. In Downey et al.'s (2011) work, the researcher explains that nurses see themselves as simply doing their jobs. Related to the question Hills raises about whether informal leaders are intentionally trying to lead, Downey et al. (2011) state that many resist a formal title or other forms of recognition. The team goes on to say that "informal leaders feel strongly that a formal title would change the dynamics of how they operate. A title might inhibit their ability to work quietly behind the scenes and could impact their ability to create a trusting environment" (Downey et al., 2011, p. 520).

Smart (2010) also acknowledges that a path to formal leadership may run counter to the characteristics of informal leaders. Like Downey et al. (2011), Smart emphasizes the humility of informal leaders. Rather than being self-focused, they are focused on getting the job done. She argues that some informal leaders resist having a formal title as they feel it can change the dynamic of their role within the organization. She highlights two specific reasons, with one being the impact a formal title may have on the relationship with their peers, possibly jeopardizing trust and causing jealousy. The other reason focuses on increased scrutiny of their work, moving from informal to formal expectations. Some informal leaders see this as a threat to their creativity and autonomy. Interestingly, Smart does note that informal leaders *would* appreciate recognition and

rewards for their accomplishments but in a manner other than a formal title. More research is needed on the leadership aspirations and goals of informal leaders.

Other Informal Leadership Attribute Considerations

Rather than exclusively focusing on the attributes of informal leaders, Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) assert that informal leadership is comprised of three things: (a) individual competence, (b) organizational culture, and (c) specific situational requirements. Stincelli and Baghurst's (2014) research provides an alternate viewpoint to that of Hills, Downey et al. (2011) and Smart (2010). Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) argue that although leadership is often attributed to individual traits and/or characteristics, it is more complex than that categorization. Characteristics are only part of the leadership picture. Aspects such as values, motives, interpersonal skills, decision-making skills, and expertise must be considered as part of a leadership assessment.

In summary, although attributes of informal leaders may vary by individual, this literature review unearthed some common themes. One aspect of informal leaders is the concept of emergent leadership, which may be a combination of self-development and leadership recognition by others. At this time, emergent leadership seems to be a characteristic specific to informal leaders, which may or may not be a precursor to formal leadership roles. Understanding the self-view of informal leaders and their aspirations continues to be an area for future research.

The Value of Informal Leaders in Organizations

Positive Influence

The literature predominantly focuses on the value of informal leaders in organizations stating that for multiple reasons, it is in the best interests of organizations to

identify and foster informal leadership opportunities (Downey et al., 2011; Lawson et al., 2018; Miner, 2013; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Pielstick, 2000; Ross, 2014). There are several reasons for this modern-day value. As Lawson et al. (2018) note, in the healthcare space particularly, it is due to the need for a highly functioning team framework in fast-paced and rapidly changing hospital environments. This framework collects information from clinical and technical inputs to ultimately serve the patient (Lawson et al., 2018). Often informal leaders play a role in facilitating this coordination. This team framework provides the basis of a horizontal leadership structure, one in which the informal leader acts with the interest of their teammates, and ultimately, with the patient, in mind (Müller, Sankaran, Drouin, Vaagaasar, Bekker, & Jain, 2018).

Doyle (2002) further notes the value of informal leaders on teams as leadership has become increasingly distributed across organizations. No longer is the formal leader the only leader. Leadership can appear at each level of a company. This "distributed leadership" helps to support both formal and informal aspects of an organization. As Smart (2010) explains, the formal organization is as one would expect; it is represented by an organizational chart with structure and hierarchy. The informal organization, however, is important, too. It is defined by Smart as "the natural ordering and structuring that evolves from the needs of the participant as they interact in their workplace…it includes informal structure, informal norms, and informal patterns of leadership" (p.73). In short, "this is the domain of the informal leader" (p. 73). The informal organization is most strongly rooted in the individual characteristics of the members of the formal organization. Informal leaders who establish trust, build relationships and create informal networks help to support the foundation of the informal organization (Smart, 2010).

Throughout the work by Peters and O'Connor, they predominantly describe informal leaders as *influence leaders.* Again, they discuss the value of informal leaders in the context of managing organizational change in healthcare. They argue that informal leaders offer an organization a "competitive advantage." Per the authors, this advantage is rooted in the established credibility of informal leaders in an organization and their ability to influence initiatives, positively or negatively.

Ross (2014), also in the healthcare setting, discusses the value of informal leaders from the perspective of what formal leaders can do to foster informal leaders in the organization, noting that "everyone can benefit from the process of informal leadership" (p. 69). The formal leader can work on leadership development with their employee and the employee has an opportunity to expand their role. The organization benefits from empowered, committed and loyal employees, who are meaningful contributors to projects and initiatives, often across the organization.

Negative Influence

Although this Capstone's review of the literature primarily highlights the value of informal leaders in organizations, other investigators point out that there can be negative aspects to informal leaders and their leadership. Both Krueger (2013) and Hills (2014) note the challenges organizations can face with informal leaders. The influence of informal leaders can be used in both positive and negative ways. When formal leaders are faced with opposition from an informal leader, Hills recommends several techniques, including open communication through regular interaction and honest dialog. In extreme cases, Hills advises "render the informal leader useless by ramping up your own leadership" (p. 200). The theory behind this approach is that emergence of an informal

leader signals a weak spot in the formal leadership structure (Ebreo, 2016). Human resources consultant and blogger Ebreo goes on to suggest that the lack of a "complete leader" enables an informal leader to emerge. This perspective is also notable given that the work by Hills (2014), for the most part, highlights the value of informal leaders in organizations. Her introduction of the work by Ebreo casts the role of an informal leader in a different light both as a weakness of formal leadership and a possible threat, stating "who needs an informal leader when the formal leaders work great" (Ebreo, 2016).

Krueger (2013) focuses on the role of informal leaders during change management, both in the value they can add as well as possible resistance they may offer. During periods of organizational transition, informal leaders can offer support to the formal leader through their relationships with other team members. Team members may feel more comfortable connecting with informal leaders about questions or concerns, rather than with their bosses, during times of uncertainty. This is an opportunity for an informal leader, with organizational support, to have a positive impact and help to support the change process. Conversely, informal leaders may assume the role of a resistor during periods of change. Negative sentiments from informal leaders can influence other staff. Krueger (2013) notes the importance of communication with all staff, and particularly in the case of the informal leader, providing a support role for them during the change process.

In summary, informal leaders can provide positive contributions, as well as potential negative impacts in organizations. Overall, based on this literature review the positive aspects of informal leadership outweigh the negative. That said, a greater understanding of the possible negative influence of informal leaders in group and teams

can lead to a better understanding of organizational dynamics, particularly as they relate to change management.

<u>Conclusion</u>

To date, most leadership researchers have overlooked or taken a simplistic approach to considering the informal leader and their organizational role. Most of this work has centered around informal leaders and their work in small groups, or comparisons with formal leadership roles (Miner, 2013; Pielstick, 2000; Wheelan & Johnston, 1996). An understanding of informal leadership has more to offer than this limited scope.

Informal leadership within the healthcare dominates this literature review. The healthcare industry, particularly the nursing field, has been the leader in identifying and harnessing the potential contributions of informal leaders (Downey et al., 2011; Krueger, 2013; Lawson et al., 2018; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Ross, 2014). This is due in part to nursing shortages in the past and the anticipated demands of clinicians in the future (Downey et al., 2011; Hills, 2014; Krueger, 2013; Lawson et al., 2018). The nursing field can serve as a model to other industries based on the successes and challenges they have experienced with the identification, mentorship, and contributions of informal leaders in their day-to-day work.

In terms of the research question for this Capstone, understanding informal leaders and their self-image, as well as how they see themselves within organizations, remains a gap in the literature. Researchers such as Downey et al. (2011) have started the conversation to begin to gain knowledge about informal leadership from the leaders themselves. This is one of the many literature gaps on this topic to be addressed.

Gaps in the Literature

Encouragingly, some progress has been made in understanding the role of the informal leader, yet there is more research to be done. The gaps in the literature are numerous and varied. This includes the fundamental research gap about distributed leadership and its intersection with informal leadership. One approach to gaining more insight is to expand the context for distributed leadership beyond schools. Understanding the role of distributed leadership in other organizations may make its connection to informal leadership clearer. Distributed leadership's focus on the process, social aspects (leader to leader and leader to follow interactions), and situational aspects of leadership (Bolden, 2011; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004) can provide more insight into informal leadership emergence in individuals. Interestingly, although informal leadership "fits" under the framework of distributed leadership, the relationship between these leadership topics is not significantly highlighted in the literature that was reviewed for this Capstone.

Also, the research about informal leadership across industries could be more varied. This includes an understanding of informal leadership in industries outside of healthcare, such as non-profit organizations, higher education, and corporations. As has been discussed throughout this literature review, healthcare, most specifically nursing, leads other fields in identifying, valuing and developing informal leaders (Krueger, 2013; Lawson et al., 2018; Ross, 2014).

Additionally, much of the research discusses the role of the informal leaders in groups and teams only. The literature primarily evaluates informal leadership within this limited framework (Miner, 2013; Pielstick, 2000). More research is needed to understand

if informal leadership can develop within an individual without a small group or team. The goal of this Capstone is to understand informal leadership directly from informal leaders, which may bridge this gap.

A more nuanced aspect of formal and informal leadership that was only briefly discussed in the literature is the possible duality of informal leadership. Essentially, is it possible to gain a deeper understanding of formal leaders who, regardless of their title and authority, lead based on dominant informal leadership qualities such as trust, relationship-building, and influence (Smart, 2010)? Or is the informal leadership categorization solely limited to individuals without title and authority? A clearer understanding of the relationship of formal to informal leadership could offer organizations options beyond categorizing employees as either/or and capture the best qualities of both forms of leadership.

By far, the largest and most significant gap is learning about informal leaders directly from informal leaders. Specifically understanding who they are professionally and why they take on this informal role, either willingly (or not) within their group, team or organization. The literature primarily touches on characteristics of informal leaders from the perspective of researchers, the organization, the formal leader, or colleagues (mostly in the form of teams). A few authors do address informal leadership characteristics in general, but in the research for this Capstone, only one project was found that addressed this topic directly in terms of considering the informal leader and their view of themselves (Downey et al., 2011). The work of Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) may be most closely aligned with this Capstone in that they sought to learn more about the qualities or perceived qualities of informal leaders. They used a questionnaire

to determine from participants whether "they had experienced or observed informal leadership" as defined by their study. Their study was larger (41 participants) than this Capstone's small, exploratory study. It sought more general information and descriptions of informal leadership and informal leaders than the interviews conducted directly with self-identified informal leaders for this Capstone.

In addition to understanding the attributes of informal leaders, gaining knowledge about their aspirations to become a formal leader or preference not to pursue that role is needed.

Contributions of this Capstone to the Literature

One of the goals of this Capstone is to bring attention to the topic of informal leadership and understanding about the possible value it can bring to organizations and individuals. More specifically, this Capstone examines how informal leaders understand themselves and their role in organizations. This literature review provides an analysis of the relevant literature to date and the areas for future research. Through interviews of self-identified and recommend informal leaders, the field will gain knowledge about informal leaders' point of view and the attributes they possess. Information about informal leaders directly from informal leaders will begin to bridge the literature gaps. Although my work primarily focuses on informal leaders employed in academia, this research should provide a foundation for the exploration of other industries.

The next chapter presents the methodology and methods used in this Capstone.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

<u>Introduction</u>

This chapter will describe the qualitative research methodology and method used

for this Capstone. This includes a discussion of the rationale for selecting this method for

an exploratory study. Within the qualitative framework, the participant sample, semi-

structured interview format and data analysis approach will also be discussed.

<u>Methodology</u>

<u>*Qualitative Research*</u>

This Capstone's research question is *"How do informal leaders view and*

understand their role as informal leaders?" As such, the primary focus of this Capstone

is to understand the informal leadership experience directly from informal leaders. This

includes the characteristics they possess as professionals and in their organizational roles.

Based on my research question, a qualitative approach was used for this

exploratory study. Qualitative research attempts "to understand individuals, groups, and

phenomena in their natural settings in ways that are contextualized and reflect the

meaning that people make out of their own experiences" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 2).

Since this Capstone is seeking to learn about informal leadership from informal leaders

themselves, the qualitative framework facilitated understanding informal leaders'

experiences. Ravitch and Carl (2016) posit that qualitative research "as a mode of inquiry

that centralizes the complexity and subjectivity of lived experience and values these

aspects of human *being* and meaning making through methodological means" (p. 5). The

importance of "lived experience" and "meaning making" is central to understanding the

organizational life of informal leaders. This includes understanding their assigned role, their informal role, and the characteristics and perspective that they bring to each. Working within the qualitative framework enabled this research project to take both an organizational and individual view of the professional experiences of these individuals in their informal leadership roles. Therefore, this Capstone is an exploratory study of informal leadership as experienced by informal leaders.

Since I interviewed informal leaders about themselves, their roles, and their organization, it was essential to protect their confidentiality. A protocol for this exploratory study was submitted to the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB process was completed on August 15, 2018 with a Category 2 Exemption.

Method

Participant Sample

Based on the IRB protocol, purposeful sampling was used to fulfill the participant criteria. As Coyne (1997) states, "in qualitative research, sample selection has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of research" (p. 623). Purposeful sampling was ideal for this small, exploratory study because as the researcher and interviewer, I was able to connect to a network of experienced colleagues whose professional experiences were relevant to this project. As Morse (1991) explains, purposeful sampling enables the researcher to "select a participant according to the needs of the study" (p. 129). Use of my network was particularly relevant to determine "the most appropriate informant" before finalizing the participants and proceeding with the interviews (Morse, 1991, p. 129). Some initial

participants for the study ultimately were not interviewed as they were unable to accommodate the interview schedule.

The criteria for this exploratory study included participants who saw themselves as informal leaders. A definition of informal leadership was provided in the recruitment emails (see Appendix A). Recruitment was done at both Drexel University and the Organizational Dynamics Program at the University of Pennsylvania. For Drexel employees, they were required to have a minimum of three years' professional employment experience, as well as be a current employee of Drexel University with a minimum of three years' employment experience at the University. For the University of Pennsylvania participants, they were required to be a current graduate student or alumnus in the Organizational Dynamics program and currently employed in an organization with a minimum of 3 years' experience in one organization.

Participant Recruitment

I began the recruitment process by reaching out to colleagues at Drexel and the University of Pennsylvania. As the result of snowball sampling, described as the use of referrals to connect with individuals with interests relevant to the research area, I connected with some of my colleagues' professional contacts who met the interview criteria (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). As Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) explain, the value of snowball sampling to qualitative research is "particularly applicable when the focus of a study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study" (p. 141). A total of 18 participants were interviewed. In two cases, participants were both alumni of the Organizational Dynamics Program and Drexel University employees.

For the 18 face-to-face interviews that were conducted, 17 were recorded with permission via a digital recorder, and for the other one I took written notes during the interview. Each interview was then transcribed into an anonymized Microsoft Word document for each interviewee. After a preliminary read through and review of each interview and response, including note taking, as recommended by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was created to systematically capture each interview question and each interviewee's response so that their answers could be comprehensively reviewed question by question.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Once the qualitative methodology was established, a semi-structured interview format was selected rather than a survey. According to Adams (2010), semi-structured interviews "aim to explore in-depth experiences of research participants, and the meanings they attribute to these experiences" (p. 18). Based on Chapter 2 of this Capstone, the literature review, I was unable to find a research study that interviewed informal leaders directly to understand their experiences. Most studies used surveys and questionnaires to identify informal leaders or observation of informal leaders in their work environment (Lawson, Tecson, Shaver, Barnes, & Kavli, 2018; Pescosolido, 2001; Pielstick, 2000; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). Surveys often asked informal leaders to self-identify or colleagues to indicate if they worked with informal leaders (Lawson et al., 2018; Pescosolido, 2001; Pielstick, 2000; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, allowed for more meaningful interaction, particularly face to face, since there is an opportunity to connect with the participant and record both their verbal and non-verbal expressions. In addition, interview

questions can be clarified or re-directed, if needed (Anderson, 2010). Interviewees were able to share and expand on their personal and professional experiences in an open and dynamic dialogue with the interviewer. Adams (2010) sums it up by saying "new insights can be gained from the perspective of the participant," which for this Capstone was essential to exploring the research question.

Interview Design

The interview question design was an iterative process. The questions are a mix of broader and narrower topics, based on my research question and my own curiosity as an informal leader. In addition, some questions are two-part questions, starting with a more general question and then followed by a more specific question to capture examples. For example, "Are there other informal leaders in your organization? What is your view of them?" The rationale behind the design of these questions is to get to the heart of who the informal leader is and to understand their role in the organization. The questions were also designed to build upon one another and take the participant through a journey to reflect on their informal leadership experience.

Once 10 interview questions were drafted and refined, I piloted them with my Capstone advisor as well as two colleagues. Their feedback about the sequence in which the questions were asked was incorporated into the final questions. The interview questions are available for review (see Appendix B). On average, interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. The meetings were conducted in private, quiet areas. Interview questions were not shared with participants in advance.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, thematic coding of the responses began. This was a multi-step process, which involved continuously and systematically reviewing

and refining the codes to identify dominant themes in the responses, as well as outliers. As explained by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), this was an organic process in which as I reviewed a new question and the corresponding answers, I often had to re-evaluate how I coded previous responses and themes, and then modify accordingly based on new data. My coding process was of a combination of text labels and color coding by theme to help capture the complexity of some of the responses, as well as to be able to accurately group the information into a distinct theme.

Although the number of responses to each question and identified theme was important in the coding process and theme identification, so too was consideration of the importance of a response as it related to insight into my research question (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Getting to the core of the informal leader experience is what I was seeking in the interview analysis.

Lastly, it was important to be mindful of any potential bias as each response was reviewed and categorized to tell the "story of the data" and not my version of the story (Anderson, 2010). Not only does this include avoiding framing data in a way to support my perspective, but also "overreaching" the data beyond the scope of what was said by the interviewees (Anderson, 2010).

Bias. In addition to managing bias in the data analysis process, I had to manage bias as a researcher with a connection to informal leadership. My primary interest in this topic stems from a background working as an informal leader. As a result, it is a topic that I am passionate and knowledgeable about. This is further complicated by also serving as a formal leader in my current and past professional positions. Having served in both roles, I have firsthand experience with both the rewards and challenges of each. That

said, my support rests with informal leaders over formal leaders; it is a bias that I'm aware of and manage in my professional life and as a Capstone researcher.

There were several specific ways in which I managed my bias towards informal leaders for this Capstone. First, I disclosed my bias towards informal leaders in Chapter 1 to be transparent and to hold myself accountable throughout this research process. Disclosing my bias was a process of self-discovery, one which led me to reflect on my interest in this topic and why I was compelled to explore it for my Capstone. Acknowledgment of this bias enabled me to create a transparent framework for each component of this study.

Second, I piloted the interview questions during the interview design phase of the Capstone. The interview questions were piloted with my advisor, along with two colleagues. Feedback from all three reviewers was incorporated to increase the clarity of the questions. As I conducted the interviews, I put effort into maintaining openness and balance in speaking with participants and recording their responses. My primary focus during the interviews was to listen to the participants and ask follow-up questions when relevant while also maintaining a professional demeanor and not directing their responses or interjecting in any way.

Third, I held myself to rigorous and systematic data collection and coding standards. Except for one interview, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed by me. This allowed me to become familiar with the interview content and identify consistent themes as well as outliers. I also set up a detailed structure for coding of the responses, involving multiple Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and workbooks to account and control for bias. Each interview and response were reviewed multiple times

individually and then collectively as themes emerged. I would often re-evaluate and re-classify responses as new data was added to keep my analysis and interpretation of both the positive and negative responses from the interviewees consistent. I let the data, not my bias, guide me to the conclusions.

Lastly, through open and ongoing discussion with my advisor, we discussed my perspective, experience and assumptions, along with techniques to manage these areas in each chapter of the Capstone. We were in frequent email communication and spoke monthly via phone to discuss each chapter before and after it was drafted. He also provided written, detailed comments after the review of each chapter draft, pointing out assumptions or areas for further clarification. This ongoing dialogue helped to mitigate the influence of bias on the design of my research and the way in which I conducted it.

Conclusion

This exploratory study about informal leaders and their leadership used a qualitative research methodology. The methods included a purposeful participant sample, along with snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews of 18 participants were used to understand the characteristics of informal leaders that influence their individual, professional and organizational leadership roles. Data analysis was conducted based on transcribed interview responses using thematic analysis. Researcher bias was also managed throughout the research process. Chapter 4 details the predominant research themes and the interview results.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

As discussed in this Capstone's literature review, a primary gap in the literature is how informal leaders understand themselves as informal leaders and how they understand their organizational roles. To begin to bridge this gap, my research question is, "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?*" This chapter presents the results of interviews with self-identified informal leaders. These interviews were conducted to understand how self-identified informal leaders view informal leadership. This chapter provides the demographic information about the interviewees, and also presents the data from the interviews and discusses the dominant themes in the interviews.

The dominant themes that emerged from the interviews include the following:

- formal leaders' influence on informal leaders as an important contributor (positive or negative) to their role as an informal leader;

- informal leaders' view of themselves as motivated by actions that contribute to the greater good;

- informal leaders as influencer and "go-to" person; and

- risk and other challenges in the role of informal leaders.

Demographics

From November 2018 to January 2019, 18 face-to-face interviews were conducted for this Capstone. The demographics of the interviewees, including their

gender, race, age, level of education, years of professional experience, job level, and type

of industry are outlined in the following table.

Table 1. Description of Demographics of Interviewees

Gender	Female (12)	Male (6)
Age Range	(4) 26-35; (5) 36-45; (2) 46-55; (1) 55+	(2) 26-35; (4) 36-45; (0) 46-55; (0) 55+
Race	(8) White; (3) Black; (1) Latina	(5) White; (1) Black
Education, Highest Level	(1) Bachelors; (7) Master's pending; (4) Masters	(0) Bachelors; (3) Master's pending; (3) Masters
Industry	(11) Higher Education; (1) Other	(4) Higher Education; (2) Other
Years' Work Experience	(0) <10; (9) 11-20; (2) 21-30; (1) 30+	(2) <10; (3) 11-20; (1) 21-30; (0) 30+
Professional Titles	(5) Coord/Admin; (7) Mgr/Dir; (0) Dir+	(1) Coord/Admin; (2) Mgr/Dir; (3) Dir+

Of note, the group was composed primarily of white interviewees (male/female;

13) and women (12), overall. There were four black individuals and one Latina. The

median age of the participants was 39, with the youngest 28 and the oldest 57.

The dominant industry represented was higher education as the interviewee

sample was drawn from current students or alumni of the Organizational Dynamics

program at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as current employees from Drexel

University, where I am employed. Two of the Drexel employees are also alumni of the

Organizational Dynamics program.

Except for one participant, everyone has completed a master's degree or has one

in progress. Years of professional experience averaged 16, with six years as a minimum

and 30 plus as a maximum years' experience. The average time interviewees have been

in their current work position is 4.3 years, with the least amount of time being one year

and the most amount of time being 15 years.

Job level and job title were mostly in the range of middle manager to executive. Two participants had more entry-level titles of "coordinator." One participant had changed her career field and transitioned from a more senior position to a coordinator role, and the other participant was in her coordinator position for eight years but has been promoted since the fall 2018 interview.

Interview Themes

After a review of the interview data, there were four primary themes that emerged. This section will discuss those themes in depth.

Formal Leaders' Influence on Informal Leaders Is an Important Contributor (Positive or Negative) to Their Role as an Informal Leader

The role of the formal leader in the work of the informal leader was a consistent theme across the interviews. Of the 10 questions that each interviewee was asked, one question specifically inquired about the formal leaders in their organization: "How do you see the formal leaders in your organization?" Although only one question specifically addressed the topic of formal leaders, the influence of formal leaders was frequently discussed in both positive and negative ways.

Informal Leaders' View of Formal Leaders-Positive Aspects.

Table 2. Description of Positive Aspects of Formal Leaders

Formal Leaders, Positive Aspects	No. of responses
Inspiring/transformational	5
Interpersonal skills	4
Job skills	2

In response to Question 7, "How do you see the formal leaders in your organization?" positive remarks from interviewees included the inspiring aspects of their formal leader (5); the leader's interpersonal skills (4); and the leader's qualifications (2).

A participant explained when discussing an inspirational formal leader in her organization, "She is taking risks with her level of transparency and engagement, acknowledging bias, sexual assault, and to be a caring community. She is well positioned to motivate people in a way…because excellence is the standard" (Participant 5, personal communication, December 6, 2018). Participant 18 described the most senior leader in their organization as "scrappy and creative" and, as a result, the organization has moved its "reputation and position forward" (Personal communication, January 10, 2019). Participant 12 stated simply that the formal leader is "excellent" and "steers the ship," adding "this person gathers opinions and implements based on the group, rather than just his opinion" (Personal communication, December 12, 2018).

Another interviewee spoke to the value of resilience in formal leadership, along with the importance of the focus on the team and the organization, rather than self. "It's about navigating the waters…know the players and the goal, taking self out of equation, and doing what you need to do to achieve the goal" (Participant 10, personal communication, December 12, 2018).

Some formal leaders were also praised for their interpersonal skills, including four responses describing qualities such as a peer-like relationship, empathy, accessibility, and transparency. Participant 5 described the relationship with her manager as "more of a colleague than a supervisor" (Personal communication, December 6, 2018). She went on to say that the most senior leader in her organization "welcomes and notes anyone who is new." Participant 9 added he has "a good team" and his boss "trusts him" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018).

Additional positive feedback about Question 7 discussed the qualifications of formal leaders. Two responses discussed the qualifications of their formal leaders and the impact of their contribution to the organization. For example, Participant 1 observed that "many of the formal leaders are organized in what they do" (Personal communication, November 27, 2018). Participant 9 stated the formal leaders are "competent, mostly subject matter experts" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Participant 6 noted that his organization has "good leadership…a strong leadership team" (Personal communication, December 7, 2018).

Table 3. Description of Neutral Aspects of Formal Leaders

Formal Leaders, Neutral Aspects	No. of responses
"Mixed bag"/transactional	3
Hierarchical/chain of command	2

Neutral responses (5) touched on varied skill levels of the formal leaders (2); transactional aspects of the informal leader's interactions with the formal leaders (1); and those who lead primarily based on the hierarchical structure and the formal chain of command (2). For example, Participant 3 described the leadership team in his organization as a "very large mixed bag" and specifically described one formal leader as "not a next level leader, more of a transactional leader" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018). Participant 16 also described her leadership team as a "mix of leadership" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant 14 observed the formal leadership to "act (or function) like a hierarchy" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018).

Informal Leaders' View of Formal Leaders-Negative Aspects.

Table 4. Description of Negative Aspects of Formal Leaders

Formal Leaders, Negative Aspects	No. of responses
Uninspiring/ineffective	17
Lack of interpersonal skills/professionalism	14

In addition to positive recognition of the impact of formal leaders on the work of informal leaders, there was negative commentary as well. This can be seen most directly in the responses to Question 7. Most informal leaders had negative feedback about the formal leaders in the organization. Seventeen (17) responses addressed the lack of inspiration from and the ineffectiveness of their formal leader, and 14 responses observed that the interpersonal skills and professionalism of their formal leaders were lacking.

Regarding organizational inspiration, Participant 8 stated, "It's a lack of vision and a lack of being able to look at the whole and think about what's best" (Personal communication December 11, 2018). Participant 17 stated that there are few formal leaders who she finds to be inspirational due to a lack of progress on organizational issues. Participant 2 observed regarding his formal leader, "One person can influence for the good or the negative. Right now, it's negative" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018). Participant 17 elaborated on the negativity by saying "It is hard to take inspiration from a leader when you don't *feel* the changes" (Personal communication, January 7, 2019). Participant 15 added:

> They don't think of the long term or sustainability. They are focused on numbers and overinflate if necessary. The staff knows when this is the case. The managers aren't being 'real.' They are driven by the optics and not the quality of the outcomes. (Personal communication, December 19, 2018)

Participant 1 also discussed a lack of cohesion and leadership among the leadership team. "Even though they are formal leaders, I think sometimes they don't display the best idea of what leadership is, amongst each other" (Personal communication, November 27, 2018). Participant 2 added, "There is a lack of unity with this group that trickles into the rest of the organization" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018).

Fourteen (14) responses noted a lack of professionalism and/or interpersonal skills among their formal leaders. Participant 7 remarked, "They are well educated and in tune to having a shared value and common goal but lack the connection to the day to day" (Personal communication, December 10, 2018). An example of this kind of disconnect was offered by Participant 14 who described her supervisor as a "bit of a 'yes' person" who often "delays bad news." "He always says yes to projects and then the team has to figure out how to make it work" (Personal communication, December 17, 2018). Participant 9 also commented on the connection with formal leaders to the informal leaders and the organization, noting, "They [the formal leaders] stay in their lane more than I would wish" (Participant 9, personal communication, December 11, 2018).

Participants 14 and 15 addressed some of the interpersonal issues with senior leaders. In one case, Participant 14 gives an example of poor communication skills during a reorganization. The senior leader told them as an aside that each of them would (or wouldn't) be getting a new job/position in the organization. "This person lacked empathy and compassion" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant 15 described consistent staff concerns about their building infrastructure. After the completion of a survey, the feedback from the senior leader was "tough" as they are

positioned in a prime location. "It's really bad working conditions, but no one complains. …There is no morale" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). In summary, Participant 7 said about the formal leadership, "They lack a focus on a number of important areas that don't directly affect them" (Personal communication, December 10, 2018).

A more serious consideration was retaliation from a formal leader to one of the interviewees. Participant 7 recounted a situation in which she felt that her formal leader retaliated against her for speaking up, being proactive, and taking initiative. She explained, "Any kind of measure of informal leadership pisses the formal leaders off." She elaborated further by saying due to the huge "gap" between formal and informal leaders in her organization regarding day-to-day operations, informal leaders try to work effectively and approach the formal leaders about issues. This then leads the formal leaders to "feel exposed" because the informal leaders are attempting to bring attention to unaddressed issues that they (the formal leaders) could have fixed. According to Participant 7, they (the formal leaders) feel threatened, a result of their personal insecurity. Participant 7 further explained, "In any team effort, if people feel threatened, it's because they are insecure. When you're on a team, you don't have to focus on weaknesses, only strengths" (Personal communication, December 10, 2018).

The working relationship between formal and informal leaders is complex, with both positive and negative aspects. The amount of negative responses from the interviewees indicates that there are more potential opportunities for developing the connections between formal and informal leaders.

Roles of Formal Leaders in Informal Leaders' Development.

Table 5. Description of Formal Leaders' Impact on Informal Leaders' Development

	Formal Leaders' Impact on Informal Leaders' Development	**No. of responses**
Negative Experiences	Due to formal leader	4
Positive Experience	Opportunity	3

As with any supervisor and employee relationship, there may be an expectation of professional or other development opportunities for the employee, fostered by the supervisor. Four (4) responses attributed an informal leadership opportunity due to a negative experience with a formal leader, while 3 responses attributed an opportunity to overall positive circumstances, rather than specifically to the formal leader.

Participant 6 explained that "every boss' informal responsibility is to set your people up for success and growth, even if it isn't here" (Personal communication, December 7, 2018). Informal leader interviewees, in general, were seeking support from their direct supervisor or the formal leadership in the organization.

In some cases, the formal leader has made a positive impact. Participant 4 took a data issue to her boss who then "elevated it," which then led to the formation of a working group (Personal communication, December 5, 2018). Participant 1, when she was new to her role, said the formal leader "trusted me to do what needs to be done. It was a leadership opportunity" (Personal communication, November 27, 2018). Participant 3 explained an opportunity that started with his idea about a technical need in the organization. This suggestion went from his boss to a senior director to the CIO and turned into an informal leadership opportunity for the employee. Participant 3 described it as a "homegrown idea raised through the ranks and became an official project, involving all parts of the organization" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018).

Conversely, 4 participants noted that they took on an informal leadership role due to a gap or failure by a formal leader. Participant 6 explained his role in terms of "other duties as assigned, part of my job 'is to make my boss' job easier.'" "Staff began to see me as a sounding board for concerns" (Personal communication, December 7, 2018). Participant 7 explained a situation in which formal leadership went on vacation for more than a week and did not put a plan for coverage in place before doing so. "I had to step up as an informal leader without a plan or notice" (Personal communication, December 10, 2018).

Role of Formal Leaders in Recognition and Rewards of/for Informal Leaders.

Table 6. Description of Formal Leaders' Recognition or Rewards for Informal Leaders

	Informal Leaders Recognized or Rewarded	No. of responses
Positive Experiences	Recognized	6
	Supported	6
	Promoted	4
Negative Experiences	Not recognized/rewarded	8
	Role is not recognized/rewarded; don't expect to be	5
	Experienced retaliation/gave an ultimatum	2

Another question that was posed to the interviewees asked the following: "Have you been recognized for this role (informal leader) by your organization? Rewarded?" Positive recognition of informal leadership by formal leaders took the form of verbal recognition (acknowledgment of work or positive feedback), promotions, and rewards, such as compensation. Interviewees were not specifically asked about recognition by their formal leader but rather recognition by the "organization," which for the purposes of this Capstone, would include formal leadership. Six (6) were recognized, in some

capacity, with an additional 4 interviewees promoted. Another 6 responses indicated a general feeling of support in their informal leadership role.

In some cases, "rewards" came in the form of self-fulfillment for the informal leader. Participant 9 explained, "Being known as a problem solver—is the best recognition you can get. Informal leaders will cross boundaries and head off problems before they become problems. That is a reward in its own" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Participant 17 remarked, informal leadership can be rewarded "by building relationships" (Personal communication, January 7, 2019). Participant 8 described "rewards are great" but she "doesn't live for that." "Take the positive and the negative with you. Set your ego aside and then look for the greater good and the rewards come" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018).

In other cases, the recognition is directly from the formal leader. In terms of direct positive recognition for supervisors, Participant 16 noted that her supervisor is "very complimentary" and she "gets a lot of feedback" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant 14 shared her supervisor "would give me accolades and let the rest of the team know," mostly in the form of verbal recognition (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant 5 remarked that she gets "thank you—a lot of thank you" (Personal communication, December 6, 2018).

A few responses addressed the concept of the supervisor as "champion." Participant 10 stated "people have to go to bat for you. It's not a given anymore!" (Personal communication, December 12, 2018). Participant 6 described that he has "a really good boss who is my champion" and "truly values what I do" (Personal communication, December 7, 2018).

Negative responses included 8 instances of respondents stating that they were not recognized or rewarded by their organization. Five (5) responses addressed that their informal leadership role is not recognized or rewarded, and, in some cases, they don't expect it will be acknowledged. Specifically related to formal leaders or the interviewees' supervisors, 2 participants explained that in addition to not being recognized, there were further negative work circumstances surrounding their informal leadership.

At an organizational level, one interviewee explained "the organization has no capacity to recognize anything" (Participant 18, personal communication, January 10, 2019). Participant 18 went on to say, "The informal leader is not rewarded here in the culture. The culture starts at the top" (Personal communication, January 10, 2019).

Moving from an organizational level to an individual one, some interviewees expressed disappointment by the treatment of their supervisor or the organization. For example, Participant 17 pointedly said, "No one gives you a bonus because you were nice and answered their questions" (Personal communication, January 7, 2019). Further, another participant ironically remarked about the concept of reward by saying she has been "rewarded with more work!" (Participant 4, personal communication, December 5, 2018). Another interviewee gave an example of a situation, which made her finally understand her value to her supervisor and the organization. When she talked about the possibility of other job opportunities and offers in a new organization, the formal leader reacted. Only then did they say to her, "I need you to stay here. You are important." This respondent further stated that she does "know now that what I'm doing is very important" (Participant 1, personal communication, November 27, 2018).

More dire feedback came in the form of responses from Participants 13 and 15. Participant 13 described "not being rewarded" and "feeling bad about it." She "needs to advance" or she "will leave" (Personal communication, December 17, 2018). Participant 15 expressed that she "is struggling with this." She "gets upset. Not promoted. No raise." She "feels extremely demoralized." She "wants to leave and is very unhappy" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018).

<u>The Needs of Informal Leaders Differ from Formal Leadership.</u>

Table 7. Description of the Needs of Informal Leaders from Formal Leaders

Needs of Informal Leaders from Formal Leaders	No. of responses
Need org change/more support from formal leaders	5

In an open-ended interview question— "Do you have any additional thoughts about your role as an informal leader that I did not cover?" five responses focused on lack of support from formal leaders and/or organizational structure. Participant 17 described that she "has given up on other opportunities due to my own frustration with lip service and promises not fulfilled." She is "discouraged by an awful lot" (Personal communication, January 17, 2019). Participant 7 describes feeling unsupported as an informal leader:

> It's very damaging to morale, culture. Those are reflected in retention and productivity. …Opportunities for growth come up but they aren't true opportunities. More attention needs to be placed on getting away from the top down model—it's not effective. A good leader knows how to listen. The gist is to encourage your team to speak up or you will lead a team who puts you in a silo. (Personal communication, December 10, 2018)

In addition, some of these five respondents did acknowledge that as informal leaders they need to learn how to or better self-advocate for themselves and their role. They can influence their own experience in their organizations and in their leadership roles by taking a more active role in their professional position. Participant 18 noted, "We have to believe that there is something important going on here…otherwise, there's just too much nonsense going on." He also offered an Edmund Burke quote: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." "We can sit out or be involved. You have to be active and engaged. …Don't become part of the muck. Navigate the muck!" (Personal communication, January 10, 2019).

In summary, for this sample of interviewees, formal leaders had both positive and negative effects on their work as informal leaders. This includes positive observations of formal leaders, including qualities such as serving as an inspirational guide, being competent in their role, and possessing strong interpersonal skills. Conversely, some informal leaders observed that their formal leaders were both uninspiring and unprofessional. In some cases, these behaviors were prevalent among the leadership team, as well. Informal leaders also discussed the impact of formal leaders on their professional development, along with their ability to grow and advance in the position. Recognition and rewards by formal leaders to informal leaders play a significant part in how informal leaders view and understand their role. Lastly, despite the challenges, informal leaders are seeking a connection with and support from formal leaders. The data provide insights about the role of formal leaders in the work life of informal leaders.

Informal Leaders See Themselves as Motivated by Actions that Contribute to the Greater Good

Reflecting on this Capstone's research question, "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?"* a key aspect of understanding informal leadership is learning more about how informal leaders see themselves in their organizational role. This specifically means examining the characteristics they exercise in their role as informal leaders, which serve as a catalyst for or contribute to their informal leadership. Interviewees were not asked one specific question to discuss their informal leadership attributes; rather, it was a theme that was touched on in nearly every interview question.

Informal Leader as a Self-Directed Professional.

Table 8. Description of Reasons Informal Leaders Take on an Informal Leadership Role

Informal Leaders Taking on an Informal Leadership Role	No. of responses
Self-directed/initiative	6
Part of their role	5
Due to formal leader	4
Opportunity	2

When asked Question 1, "Tell me about a time when you took on an informal leadership role," the following themes emerged from the respondents: to self-direct their energy and their work (6); part of their role (5); due to the formal leader (4); and due to an opportunity (2). Examples given by respondents focused on their ability to speak up and be proactive when there was an organizational need or opportunity. Participant 3 gave an example of a technology need that had been neglected in the organization. His perspective was "we can try to be proactive about this, or not" (Participant 3, personal communication, December 4, 2018). He was proactive. He had an idea and decided to see

how far he could take it. Ultimately, he was supported by various levels of formal leadership and his idea was implemented.

Further, Participant 4 had a similar experience to Participant 1 in which her initiative had a positive impact on the organization. In a report from another team, she noticed that students had weak Microsoft Excel skills. She brought this to her supervisor "and then he elevated it" (Personal communication, December 5, 2018). The Dean was not supportive but ultimately a working group was formed to examine the issue. In the end, her willingness to be proactive had a positive impact on both the curriculum and the academic experience for students.

Participant 1 explained that due to her supervisor's dual role, both as an academic and an administrator, early on she recognized that she "needed to be in a self-directed leadership role" (Personal communication, November 27, 2018). Her supervisor had too many demands to juggle. She was proactive and willing to take on this informal role.

Another example of a proactive approach/taking initiative was provided by Participant 6, who explained that he "hears complaints about areas (in his organization) that are not under my purview." Yet knowing how busy his supervisor is, he offered to learn more about what was happening and began to interview members of the team for direct feedback about issues and solutions. He was able to identify the red flags and ultimately the boss saw the issues and now the unit reports to Participant 6. As he explains, "Other peers may have said 'that is not my problem.'" "Other duties as assigned" is that part of his job that enables him "to make my boss' job easier" (Personal communication, December 7, 2018).

Participant 9 offered an example of taking initiative on a project that had been floundering for 6 months. He decided to form a working group because he was "fed up" due to lack of progress from another team. He became the Chair of the working group since it was his idea. Unlike feedback from other informal leaders about taking initiative, Participant 9 explained that he was angry about his role and what happened. "This belongs to another group. The person who should be doing this is an introvert with an MIA supervisor" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). He thinks someone else would have taken this on, but later, when the deadlines were tighter and the stakes higher.

Perhaps Participant 2 sums up this theme and the informal leadership mindset best by saying, "every opportunity to speak up or present ideas, you should run with it. If I don't, I've failed to do my job and shouldn't work there" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018).

Informal Leader as a Motivated Professional. Given that the informal leadership role may or may not be recognized and supported by supervisors and organizations, understanding what motivates informal leaders to act regardless of recognition or reward is a key aspect of understanding who they are. Throughout the interviews, but specifically through Question 4, the topic of motivation to act was addressed for this group of informal leaders: "As an informal leader, what motivates you to act in this capacity?" as well as through Question 3: "What is the catalyst for you to 'step up'?"

Table 9. Description of Motivators for Informal Leaders

Motivators for Informal Leaders	No. of responses
Greater good/improvement/impact	18
Relationships/connections	13
Role of self; intrinsic motivation	10
Sense of responsibility	10
Self-serving	8

Passion/pride/commitment	6
Avoid anxiety/pain	4
Sense of justice	2
Orgs role/orgs influence	2

Table 9 summarizes the responses to these questions, as well as themes across the interviews. Most of the responses focus on ways in which informal leaders contribute to or are impacted by the organization, including for the greater good (18); in support of relationships and connections (13); intrinsic motivation from the informal leader (10); a personal sense of responsibility (10); their own self-interest (8); passion, pride and commitment to their work (6); to avoid organizational anxiety or pain (4); a sense of justice (2); and influence of the organization (2). Responses from interviewees that were outliers included one respondent who was unsure of what motivated them and another questioning if their actions are driven by situations rather than their own personal motivation.

The theme of these informal leaders being motivated by their contribution to the "greater good" is one that will be touched on throughout this chapter as one of the key themes that emerged from speaking with informal leaders. The dominant informal leadership motivator for the interviewees was contributing to the organization for the benefit of everyone, based on 18 responses. "Greater good" as a motivator for these interviewees can be understood as an inclusive, impactful, and forward-thinking approach. For example, as Participant 17 explained, "The motivation comes from the fact that there could be a better outcome for the effort expended now" (Participant 17, personal communication, January 7, 2019). Participants 4, 10, and 14 had similar yet unique responses about their motivation to help others through their informal leadership.

Participant 4 stated, "It's about helping people and having an *impact*" (Personal communication, December 5, 2018). Participant 10 noted, "If you can be in the middle and *impact* things on both sides, then everyone is better off. If everyone is better off, you're elevating your own station by elevating everyone else's" (Personal communication, December 12, 2018). Participant 14 said, "It's a sense of pride in your work and the ability of that work to have an *impact*" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Lastly, Participant 8 summarized the "greater good" sentiment by saying, "If you can leave things better than when you found them, that's great" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). These informal leaders acknowledge that by taking a proactive approach and supporting their colleagues, both the organization and the informal leader benefit.

Informal Leader as a Connected Professional. Another identified motivator for informal leaders, with 13 responses, was the role of relationships and connections. The responses discussed how the interviewees were motivated to act or enact their informal leadership skills on behalf of others. Participant 1 puts others at the core of her work life. Her goal is "for people to feel included and part of the center. Knowing who you work with is really important" (Personal communication, November 27, 2018). Participant 15 explained that she is motivated by "the people piece." She "wants to help and be helpful." That brings her "joy and satisfaction. To help and listen and be a resource" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant 16 described herself as a "caregiver." She went on to say that she wants "to help anyone and everyone in the moment." But she is also a developer: "To see the good in people and wanting to move them forward. These are the internal instincts that help me to move forward" (Personal communication,

December 19, 2018). Participant 5 acknowledged that although she has a challenging work environment, it is the relationships that keep her going. She "can and should speak up and contribute." "There is hope (even though things are messed up!)" (Personal communication, December 6, 2018). The relationships sustain her. Participant 1 is motivated as an informal leader by "making people feel like they are included." She went on to say that if she was not in her role, she "doesn't know what would happen" (Personal communication, November 27, 2018). Participant 18 discussed an example when he advocated for a student who he believed was being treated unjustly by the institution. He has "fought for students" and it is this connection that has motivated him to act in his informal leadership role (Personal communication, January 10, 2019). Each of these informal leaders is referencing their ability as an informal leader to serve as organizational connectors and those who foster relationships.

Informal Leader as a Self-Aware Professional. The interviewees also explained that they were motivated to act as informal leaders because this is "who they are," and their sense of self, both as an individual and as a member of the organization (10 responses). This was described by Participant 4 as "internally driven" and "just my nature" (Personal communication, December 5, 2018). Participant 2 described it as "at my core" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018). Participant 8 described herself as a "compassionate person." She related a situation from as early as kindergarten in which she realized "something in me to comfort, fix, help, and nurture" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Participant 7 explained that her "desire for self is excellence" and her "motivation is completely intrinsic" (Personal communication, December 10, 2018). Participant 6 remarked that this is "who I am." He has "a

commitment to do things well and thorough" and "stay true to myself" (Personal communication, December 7, 2018). The thread that runs through these responses that several of the interviewees explain is that they *are* the informal leader, through and through, and in each aspect of their lives. It is not a role that is only assumed when they enter the workplace, but rather a part of their authentic selves that they share with others and the organization.

Informal Leaders as "Go-To" Person and Influencer

Informal leaders acknowledged that they are often considered a "go-to" person with influence in their organization. Question 5, "How do you see yourself (or your role) in groups?" highlights this characteristic of informal leaders in which they often serve as an organizational hub for both colleagues and formal leaders. In response to this question and throughout the interviews, 15 responses indicated that they served as a central figure in their organization and as someone that others see as a leader and a doer.

Table 10. Description of Characteristics that Make an Informal Leader a "Go-To" Person

Characteristics of Informal Leader as a "Go-To" Person	No. of responses
"Go-to" person	15
Collaborator	9

As Participant 17 explained, her "experience is recognized." She is "contacted regularly for information in her field. The 'go-to'ness is your willingness to help others. Word of mouth is huge for the informal leadership title" (Personal communication, January 7, 2019). Related to experience, Participant 1 expressed a similar sentiment in that her role looks like a "paper pusher," but her role is "very robust" in that she "is a point person." She's the "go to." Everyone knows who she is (even if she doesn't know

them). She keeps all the pieces together and everything is moving as it should. "A lot of people come and go, when they get new people—Go to her! That's the introduction. You need to know her! People get referred to me." (Participant 1, personal communication, November 27, 2018). Participant 4 commented that she is often referred to as "the expert." The introduction is made to clients as "you have to talk to 'Leslie,'" rather than referring than directing them to the team (Personal communication, December 5, 2018). Participant 11 talked about a role other than work in which she, too, is "the point person and the organizer" (Personal communication, December 12, 2018). Lastly, Participant 16 remarked, "I wasn't the manager or boss, but everyone came to me to get the work done or to strategize and move things forward" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). This sentiment sums up the quintessential role of the informal leader, without formal authority or responsibility, as a critical connector and catalyst in the organization.

Interestingly, in response to Question 5, 9 interviewees also commented on their role as collaborators in groups, which may also speak to being a "go-to" or primary contact in the organization. Participant 10 talked about collaboration and teamwork in the form of a "beginner's cup." She explained this approach to collaborations as an openness to ideas and to her colleagues: "Sometimes people just want to feel like someone is listening to them" (Participant 10, personal communication, December 12, 2018). Participant 16 stated that she "wants to help the team come together and be a leader" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018).

Others explained how they use their informal leadership role to support others. Participant 12 clearly stated how much he dislikes group meetings, but, as a result, takes on the role of a "referee" or a facilitator focusing on keeping the team work on time and

on track (Personal communication, December 12, 2018). Participant 8 also expressed their outward looking focus by stating, "It's not about you, it's about them" in the context of being an active listener, a resource to others, and ultimately someone who others seek out in the organization (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Participant 5 acknowledged that she is "making more of an effort to listen to people or ask more what they think" (Personal communication, December 6, 2018). Lastly, Participant 13 sees herself "as a leader in the group but likes to stay open to the possibilities" (Personal communication, December 17, 2018).

Based on the interviews, the role of the informal leader as point person appears to be two-fold. First, it is based on the expertise of the informal leader, which enables them to become a "go-to" person, and second it is the informal leader's focus on relationships and collaboration that sets them apart in the organization. The data indicate the integral role of the informal leader to their colleagues.

The Informal Leader Experience. Understanding informal leadership from informal leaders is another layer in compiling the answer to my research question, "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?*" The interviewees expressed both positive and negative sentiments about their organizational role as an informal leader. Question 2, "How do you view and understand your role as an informal leader within your organization?" and Question 6, "Are there other informal leaders in your organization? What is your view of them?" addresses this topic directly, but there are also responses throughout the interviews that contribute to the data about this question.

Table 11. Description of the Experiences of Informal Leadership from Informal Leaders

	Experiences of Informal Leadership from Informal Leaders	No. of responses
Positive Experiences	Positive Force/contribution	18
	Influence/influencer	17
	"Go-to" person	15
	Connector/collaborator	12
	Receive feedback from others	9
	Rewarding/impactful	9
	Motivator	7
	Responsible person	6
	Relationship-focused	6
	Independence	5
	Do more	5
	Experts	3
Negative Experiences	Lack of value to/support from org	15
	Lack of power/authority	4
	No future in the informal leader role	3
	Lack of clarity around the role	2
	Lack of connection with other informal leaders	1

Positive Aspects of Informal Leadership-Positive Force and Organizational

Contribution. Although there are positive and negatives aspects of informal leadership,

according to informal leaders, based on this group of interviewees there are more benefits

to being an informal leader than there are drawbacks to being an informal leader.

Positive aspects of an informal leadership role (either recognized firsthand by the

informal leader or recognized in other informal leaders) include the following areas:

serving as a positive force (18); having influence (17); being a "go-to" person (15); acting

as a connector/collaborator (12); experiencing feedback from others (9); feeling impactful

(9); being a motivator (7); being a responsible colleague (6); focusing on relationships

(6); exercising independence (5); encouraged to do more (5); and serving as an expert (3).

Being considered a positive force (18) in the organization or making a positive

contribution was the dominant response in terms of how informal leaders understand their

informal leadership role. Although not always easy or supported, informal leaders offered

encouraging responses to and about their work and the work of others as informal

leaders. As Participant 9 stated there "has to be a willingness to wade in" (Personal

communication, December 11, 2018) and to "ignore those who say, 'why are you doing

extra?'" (Participant 6, personal communication, December 7, 2018). Participant 7

remarked, "It is good to share ideas, even in an environment where that is not supported

or encouraged" (Personal communication, December 10, 2018). Effort must be put forth

by the individual informal leader to make and sustain their organizational contribution.

When speaking about their positive firsthand experiences as informal leaders, it

comes with sense of pride in their role and the success of their colleagues, too. About

informal leaders, in general, Participant 16 said, "They are the people who have a passion

to improve and drive things" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant

1 acknowledged, "They give a lot of themselves" (Personal communication, November

27, 2018). Participant 10 remarked that she "is proud of the number of people that she

views as informal leaders and the diversity of their approaches" (Personal

communication, December 12, 2018).

Participant 7, speaking firsthand about herself and her wish for her colleagues,

noted that she "loves to see people thrive. I like to thrive, so you should, too." She goes

on to say that she wishes that "more people were encouraged to do this, more comfortable

to do this and more supported to do this. Most innovation comes from this environment"

(Personal communication, December 10, 2018). Participant 9 shared a similar sentiment

about sharing the positive ripples of informal leadership by saying he wishes "informal leaders would do more of what they do. They want to help the organization at large, even if they aren't directly benefitting. They are in it for the long haul" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Participant 10 explained that she "genuinely likes people and values them enough to want the best for them" and then she further acknowledged "even when they are not nice to you." Participant 9 offers a reflective observation about the positive role of informal leaders by saying, "The benefits are unexpected and long lasting" and he "would not trade them for much" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Overall, the respondents acknowledge some of the challenges of their informal leadership role yet remain positive about the impact of informal leaders and their organizational contributions.

      <u>Positive Aspects of Informal Leadership-Influencer.</u> Also discussed by the respondents was their ability to positively use their influence (17 mentions) across the organization. Participant 16 explained, "No matter where you are, amongst any corporate ladder or formal title, you still have informal leadership influence in certain areas…it's a key piece to effective leadership or being an effective employee of the organization" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant 3 elaborated on this point by saying, "When you're in a position where you have no formal leadership, it becomes an interesting balance to see if and how other people involve you in what they are doing. …If you choose to be active, you can influence at a much higher level—even more so that formal leaders" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018).

      Participant 9 discussed the role of influence and his role as an informal leader with the terminology of "broker." He believes he needs to "motivate the organization to

do what it needs to do to be successful." He considers the concept of "brokerage" and the role of influence. This involves determining, "How do we understand different perspectives and make it work for everyone?" This is the "role of nudging the organization forward to accomplish its goals, when we don't have the authority to enforce it" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018).

On an individual basis, interviewees considered their ability to be an influencer to their colleagues and the organization. Participant 11 sees herself "as an influencer, directing day-to-day decisions" (Personal communication, December 12, 2018). Participant 5 explained that she can use her influence at a department level and then elevate those topics and issues to higher and central levels within the organization (Personal communication, December 6, 2018). Participant 11 discussed how, when she is in a group with decision makers, she "can't overtly express opinions about the decisions." She "lets them lead and then tries to influence how the discussion will go" (Personal communication, December 12, 2018).

Participant 16 explained that she realized she was an informal leader through her influence. She described the realization as "when you know that you can influence and talk to others and have guidance. When you see that people listen to you. You may not be able to control their actions, but you can influence their thought process" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Similarly, Participant 11 and Participant 14 shared the positive impact of their influence on both decision-making and the morale of their respective offices. The influence of informal leaders can have a positive impact for both the organization and the development of the informal leader.

The role of the informal leader as a "go-to" person was identified in 15 responses as a positive aspect of informal leadership. This aspect of the informal leader is discussed fully in Table 10. Overall, respondents found more positive than negative aspects of their informal leadership roles.

Negative Aspects of Informal Leadership-Organizational Role. Despite all the positive responses interviewees had about their informal leadership, there was a significant amount of negative feedback about the informal leadership role. This includes the experience of lack of value to the organization/support from the organization (15); lack of power/authority (4); lack of future in the informal leadership role (3); lack of clarity around the informal leadership role (2); and lack of connection with other informal leaders (1).

A primary response from the interviewees was feeling that they are not valued by the organization, as well as an overall lack of support from the organization in their informal leader role. Participant 17 remarked:

> You can beat your head against the wall, speak up and beg for change but when it doesn't come and you repeat these actions and still don't see the changes—at what point, this informal leader role that I put all this effort into is not rewarded (money, recognition, organizational change) how do you keep it going? Your colleagues may need you. Other times, you give up. (Personal communication, January 17, 2019)

She went on to say, "Where do you draw the energy from when you don't see the changes?" (Personal communication, January 17, 2019). When discussing the lack of support for a respected colleague in an informal leadership role, Participant 18 noted,

"No one cares about him. Someone may get out a bag of gingersnaps for a goodbye party" (Personal communication, January 10, 2019). Another interviewee remarked, "Everyone is out for themselves" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Participant 7 explained her internal process as an informal leader when deciding whether to act as, "I could help, but there is push back and no support" and, "Is it worth it?" and, "The external influences do not support" (Personal communication, December 10, 2018).

Regarding the lack of power and authority that are experienced in the informal leader role, Participant 18 spoke to the dilemma it causes him as an informal leader. "People ask me to do things, holding me accountable where I do not formally have the ability to get them done." He explained that he "does not recoil from the ask. It depends who is asking and how they are asking" (Personal communication, January 10, 2019). Participant 9 used the analogy of "traffic cop without a gun" to explain the role of informal leadership role. The informal leadership role is "motivation without authority." "It would be better if authority wasn't needed" (Personal communication, December 11, 2018). Participant 17 noted that she:

> doesn't hold the power in a formal position to have the impact, I can only do this in an informal way. There are problems that need fixing. …It's a balance of feeling like you have some voice but perhaps not enough power. All I can do is suggest change, not affect it. (Personal communication, January 7, 2019)

Lastly, informal leaders discussed the complications of their organizational role, particularly related to future development in their informal leader role and general lack of understanding of their position. Participant two observed, "There can be no growth path for the role. What is the path to recognition for an informal leader?" (Personal

communication, December 4, 2018). Participant 15 noted that in her organization, as an informal leader, "there is blurriness of who does what" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Participant 11 described informal leaders who lead various groups being seen primarily as "volunteers" (Personal communication, December 12, 2018). Participant 17 acknowledged the role is "most often thankless and discouraging" (Personal communication, January 7, 2019).

Informal leaders did express negative sentiments about their roles and their interactions with their organizations. The negative aspects of informal leadership could highlight areas for organizations to consider for more support and development of informal leaders.

Risk and Other Challenges in the Role of Informal Leaders

At times during the interview process, there were questions that showed clear consensus while some responses were more distributed. Further, other questions had answers that I categorized as "outliers." The outlier responses were powerful and speak to some lesser known aspects of the informal leadership experience for the interviewees and may identify areas for further research.

Table 12. Description of Interview Outliers Regarding the Role of the Informal Leaders

Interview Outliers Regarding the Role of Informal Leaders (ILs)	No. of responses
Identification of ILs	8
Role of risk for the IL	4
Current and future research	4
To relieve pain for the IL and others	3
Feedback about formal leaders	3
IL as a path to formal leadership	3
Formal leader with IL qualities (duality)	2
IL leadership insecurities	2
Situational aspect of IL	1

IL as an opposing force	1
Role of IL versus subject-matter expert	1
ILs have more fun!	1

The outlier responses are categorized as comments about the identification of informal leaders (8); the role of risk for informal leaders (4); feedback about this Capstone and future research (4); the role of informal leaders in relieving organizational pain (3); additional feedback about formal leaders (3); informal leadership as a path to formal leadership; the duality of formal and informal leadership (the possibility of being in both roles simultaneously) (2); insecurities of informal leaders (2); the situational aspects of the informal leadership role (1); the informal leader as an opposing force in the organization (1); the role of an informal leader versus a subject-matter expert (1); and the fun aspect of being an informal leader (1).

The identification of informal leaders as a concern of the interviewees was significant given that this Capstone is seeking to identify aspects of the informal leader role. However, without self-identifying or being identified by others as an informal leader, greater understanding of this role is not possible.

Participant 2 stated it is not for an individual to self-identify as an informal leader; instead, this designation comes from colleagues and peers. "Being recognized as an informal leader is not from the organization but from those around you, those you're impacting" (Personal communication, December 4, 2018). Participant 2 went on to say:

> there is an open ended-ness to who is defined as a leader, an informal leader. What's defined as an informal leader on paper may be evident to the individuals but not those around them. You could be doing all the things as an informal leader but never know it. (Personal communication, December 4, 2018)

Additionally, Participant 2 explained that he doesn't think it's important to define informal leaders. Participant 17 countered with a different perspective by saying, "It's not a title bestowed upon you. It could be potentially perceived or felt" (Personal communication, January 7, 2019). Participant 16 asked, "How do you help people to self-assess to recognize when they are informal leaders? One day you turn around and realize it" (Personal communication, December 19, 2018). Taking informal leader identification a step further, Participant 18 had a more existential comment by saying, "How do I know I exist?" He perceives that he is an informal leader, based on his interactions with others and the way that they respond to him (Personal communication, January 10, 2019).

Another area for more consideration is the informal leader and the role of risk. This was not a dominant theme but one that was mentioned in a few responses. Participant 17 explains: "There is risk involved in this. The risk is you have a big mouth, talk too much and don't know your place. There is a lot of risk you take when you open your mouth" (Personal communication, January 7, 2019). Participant 9 added, as an informal leader "when it goes badly, it goes bad rather fantastically. This may be the risk that you take." Without formal authority, action from informal leaders may be considered a risk in some organizations.

The areas that presented themselves as outliers in the interviews offer additional insights into aspects of the informal leaders and their roles, as well as offering additional areas for research.

Summary

The responses from the informal leaders interviewed for this Capstone provided valuable insights into my research question, "*How do informal leaders view and*

understand their role as informal leaders?" The demographics of this small group of 18 participants mainly represented the field of higher education. In addition, more females than males were interviewed, and the average age of the interviewees was 36-45 years old. Most interviewees had 11-20 years professional experience and had or were pursuing a graduate degree. The participants were mostly White with a few Black interviewees and one Latina interviewee.

The primary themes that emerged from the interviewees include:

1. Formal Leaders' Influence on Informal Leaders Is an Important Contributor (Positive or Negative) to Their Role as an Informal Leader. This theme focuses on the positive and negative influence of formal leaders on informal leaders, including their professional development and how informal leaders see their role in the organization through recognition and rewards (or lack thereof). For example, there were 11 positive responses about aspects of formal leaders, while there were 17 negative responses that found formal leaders to be uninspiring or ineffective. It also discusses the professional development support that informal leaders are seeking from formal leaders, including 3 positive responses and 4 negative responses from participants.

2. Informal Leaders See Themselves as Motivated by Actions that Contribute to the Greater Good. This theme discusses how informal leaders experience their professional roles as self-directed, motivated, connected and self-aware colleagues. There were 13 responses about the significance of relationships and professional connections, and 10 responses about self-motivation as an informal leader. Participants also talked about how contributing to the greater good of the organization is a catalyst for their actions (18 participants).

3. Informal Leaders as Influencer and "Go-To" Person. This theme highlights the impact of the informal leader in the organization as someone who serves as a point person and collaborator. Ultimately, this role serves as a resource for others. Fifteen participants considered themselves a "go-to" person in their organization. Also discussed are the positive and negative effects of their informal leadership on the organization and their professional role. Fifteen participants expressed feeling unvalued in their role and a lack of support from their organization.

4. Risk and Other Challenges in the Role of Informal Leaders. This theme examines some of the lesser known aspects of the informal leader experience, including navigating risk, which was discussed by 4 participants. Also addressed by interviewees were the other challenges they face as informal leaders, such as understanding what it means to be an informal leader (8 participants).

In addition to the data captured about these themes, the interviews were rich with observations that present themselves to be analyzed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS & CONCLUSION

<u>Introduction</u>

Chapter 5 will analyze the data from the participant interviews. There will also be a discussion of the findings and how the interview themes answer my research question "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?*" Also, how the interview data fit with the literature will be examined; specifically, how is it aligned, how it is different, and what gaps remain. The limitations of this study will be discussed. The chapter will also review practice implications for organizations and informal leaders, along with recommendations for future research.

To recap, Chapter 4 provided the interviewee demographics and discussed the primary themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The dominant themes that emerged from the interviews included:

1. Formal leaders' influence on informal leaders is an important contributor (positive or negative) to their role as an informal leader.

2. Informal leaders see themselves as motivated by actions that contribute to the greater good.

3. Informal leaders act as "go-to" person and influencer.

4. Risk and other challenges are faced in the role of informal leaders.

An overview of each theme follows.

Formal Leaders' Influence on Informal Leaders Is an Important Contributor (Positive or Negative) to Their Role as an Informal Leader

Based on the interviews, a recurring theme was the impact of formal leaders on the role of informal leaders. There were four subthemes about formal leaders, both positive and negative, outlined below:

Informal Leaders' View of Formal Leaders. The responses included a positive view of formal leaders focusing on inspirational or transformation qualities (5); strong interpersonal skills (4); and noteworthy job skills (2). Negative views of formal leaders included uninspiring or ineffective leadership (17), and a lack of interpersonal skills and/or professionalism (14).

Role of Formal Leaders in Informal Leaders' Development. Feedback from informal leaders about the formal leader's impact on their leadership development included positive experiences (4), such as a collaborative opportunity with a colleague and negative experiences (3), such as increased responsibility due to unclear job expectations.

Role of Formal Leaders in Recognition and Rewards of/for Formal Leaders. Discussion of recognition and rewards offered by formal leaders had both positive and negative responses. Positive responses included informal leaders feeling recognized (6); supported (6); and, in some cases, they were promoted (4). Negative responses included informal leaders feeling individually not recognized/rewarded (8); the informal leadership role is not recognized/rewarded (5); and, in extreme cases, the informal leader experienced retaliation or needed to give the formal leader an ultimatum to recognize their work (2).

        <u>The Needs of Informal Leaders from Formal Leadership.</u> At the core of this theme is that formal leaders do impact the professional and organizational roles of informal leaders. This presents challenges and opportunities for both formal and informal leaders and their professional relationships. Five (5) interviewees expressed the need for organizational change and/or more support from formal leaders needed for their informal leadership role.

Informal Leaders See Themselves as Motivated by Actions that Contribute to the Greater Good

        This theme provides insight into what motivates informal leaders in their professional roles and their role in the organization, as well as the impact of their actions. The subthemes are outlined below.

        <u>Informal Leader as a Self-Directed Professional.</u> Interviewees discussed what led them to take on an informal leadership role. Responses included it was self-directed/they took initiative to do so (6); informal leadership is an expected part of their professional role (5); it was due to an ineffective formal leader (4); and it was due to an opportunity from a formal leader or colleague (2).

        <u>Informal Leader as a Motivated Professional.</u> Participants reflected on the factors that motivated them to be and serve as an informal leader. This included working for the greater good (18); to support relationships (13); self-motivation (10); sense of responsibility (10); based on their own self-interests (8); passion for their work (6); to avoid anxiety or pain (4); based on a sense of justice (2); and to meet the expectations of their role or the organization (2).

        <u>Informal Leader as a Connected Professional.</u> Interviewees discussed the relevance of relationships and connections to their work as an informal leader. Feedback

about the impact of relationships and connections as an informal leader included

responses about the significance of relationships and maintaining them (3); the value of

making connections (3); the importance of inclusion and having a sense of belonging (2);

the role of compassion (1); meaningfulness of being a connector (1); being a facilitator

(1); breaking down silos (1); and the role of influence/their ability to influence (1).

> Informal Leader as a Self-Aware Professional. Inherent in this category is the

informal leader as a self-motivated, self-reliant professional who their peers connect with

and identify as an organizational resource. Part of the categorization of the interviewees

as self-aware came from their feedback in certain areas in which they expressed

vulnerability about their informal leadership role. For example, this was expressed as

negative feelings about the role (15); acknowledging self-serving aspects of the role (8);

recognizing their insecurities (2); and observing anxieties about the role (4).

Informal Leaders as "Go-To" Person and Influencer

This theme identifies and discusses the organizational experience of informal

leaders as they understand it. This includes their roles as a "go-to" person and influencer

in the organization. This theme also presents feedback from the informal leaders about

the positive aspects of their role such as being a valued contributor and negative aspects

of their role such as feeling unvalued and unsupported by the organization. Although

informal leaders have a role that is not necessarily formally recognized by title or

authority, they strive to be an asset to the organization, given the opportunity to do so.

Risk and Other Challenges in the Role of Informal Leaders

The theme of risk for informal leaders may seem paradoxical. Informal leaders

don't have formal authority for which they are held accountable, so how can this role be

risky if it isn't generally recognized? Based on the respondents' replies, they assume risk in their role partly because identification of informal leaders is not well understood. To a greater extent, some informal leaders, due to their role, feel empowered to speak up or act (without formal authority to do so) and therefore assume risk in the organization. From the perspective of some informal leaders, the risk in their role can be rewarding.

Discussion

Each of the four themes addresses some aspect of the research question "*How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?*" The themes offer a specific organizational view from the informal leaders' perspective.

Informal leadership may not be acknowledged or well defined in some organizations (Downey et al., 2011; Krueger, 2013; Miner, 2013; Ng'ambi & Bozalek, 2013; Pielstick, 2000; Shaughnessy et al., 2017; Smart, 2010; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014); yet, despite that, informal leaders appear to have a common understanding of their informal leadership role. Informal leaders understand their role through a combination of their own professional self-awareness and ownership of their role, in addition to their interactions with leaders and other employees.

Overall, the informal leaders I interviewed shared common characteristics as informal leaders that relate back to the dominant themes of this Capstone.

Findings

Informal Leaders Seek Engagement, Learning Opportunities, and Recognition from Formal Leaders

When respondents had a positive experience with their formal leaders, they were complimentary in describing both the characteristics of these leaders and the

opportunities they received in areas such as mentoring or professional development from these leaders.

However, the data primarily show that informal leaders had negative experiences with formal leaders at both organizational and interpersonal levels. Informal leaders are seeking inspiring and effective leadership from their supervisors and leadership teams. Of note, informal leaders would like to see better collaboration among the formal leaders themselves. Additionally, informal leaders would like an interpersonal connection, along with more professionalism, from their formal leaders.

In addition, when presented with professional development or leadership opportunities from formal leaders, the informal leaders were receptive to stepping in or taking on a larger role. In some cases, however, informal leaders had opportunities due to shortfalls from formal leaders. Even though the context for these opportunities was not ideal, informal leaders stepped into the leadership role.

Lastly, informal leaders seek and appreciate support and recognition from formal leaders. Some participants expressed being recognized or supported in some capacity. In some cases, this included their own feelings of fulfillment for their work as an informal leader. However, most informal leaders did not feel recognized nor rewarded by their formal leaders. Worse, some informal leaders don't expect to be acknowledged for their work in any way. In a small number of cases (2), informal leaders feared retaliation or needed to give the formal leader an ultimatum to be recognized for the work in their role.

Informal Leaders are Self-Motivated to Make a Positive Contribution

Part of understanding informal leaders in their informal leadership roles was gaining a better understanding of what makes them "tick" in their role and the

characteristics that make them informal leaders. Based on the results, most informal leaders are motivated to act based on their own initiative. They expressed themselves as self-directed individuals and employees who want to make a meaningful contribution. Interviewees offered examples of situations in which they saw problems or areas for improvement and decided to act or bring to their manager's attention to make a positive impact.

This raises the question—why would someone take these extra steps when it isn't technically part of their professional role? As the interviewees explained, it is because of who they are, personally and professionally. It's the right thing to do from their perspective, and informal leaders feel rewarded by that action. The overwhelming takeaway from the results of the participant interviews is that these informal leaders are motivated to contribute to the greater good, establish relationships, make improvements, and have a positive, lasting impact.

In other cases, the interviewees expressed that their informal leadership may be influenced by the organization. Some interviewees believe informal leadership is part of their job based on the organizational culture or structure. There may be an expectation that employees "step up," as leaders, regardless of their title. This may or may not be overtly stated by the organization (or in the employee's job description). It may also be influenced by cultural norms.

Other interviewees explained that they assumed an informal leadership role due to an opportunity. Based on the participant responses, opportunities could be "positive" or "negative." A *positive* opportunity is one in which the informal leader was presented with a welcome chance to collaborate or lead. A *negative* opportunity is one in which the

employee may have had to assume an informal leadership role due to shortcomings in the formal leadership.

Informal Leaders Play a Central Organizational Role

Being identified as both a "go-to" person and influencer in the organization was another predominant result of the informal leader interviews. Despite not having a formal title and/or formal authority in a particular capacity, the majority of the interviewees self-identified as a "go-to" person, described as a point person, organizer, leader, or unifier. This role was also characterized as someone who takes initiative and who has expertise. Essentially, the interviewees often serve as an organizational hub for colleagues and formal leaders, alike. Of note, the role of word of mouth and referrals from other employees is what helps to establish this "go-to" role.

Interviewees also discussed their awareness of and their ability to influence colleagues, and even formal leadership. The participants observed their influence through involvement in projects or engagement with others. Informal leaders discussed colleagues seeking their guidance and then implementing their feedback. In some cases, the informal leaders served as a conduit or a broker to help different teams across the organization accomplish their goals.

Informal Leadership Presents Challenges for Informal Leaders

Participants were candid about the challenges they faced in their informal leadership roles. Despite all the positive impacts this role can have for informal leaders, there are negative implications, too. Lack of organizational support was discussed by most of the interviewees. Lack of support came in the form of no recognition for their work as an informal leader and feeling that they are not valued. The lack of clarity about

the role in the organization also left some informal leaders feeling like the role is thankless, and there is no future growth in their position. Ultimately, this can lead to burnout for informal leaders.

Other challenges discussed by the interviewees included the role of risk in being an informal leader. This is due, in part, to lack of clarity about the informal leadership role. Organizationally, it is not clear where they fit in and for the informal leader, their role can be blurry, too. Therefore, action by informal leaders on behalf of colleagues or themselves can be risky because expectations are not clear. In some cases, interviewees discussed fear of retaliation for their actions from formal leaders. Interviewees expressed their anxiety about the informal leadership role. Anxiety can be due to both their direct actions as an informal leader and, at times, serving as a container for organizational anxiety (Participant 9, personal communication, December 11, 2018).

Revelations in the Data

In Chapter 1 of this Capstone, I outlined my assumptions about the responses from the interview participants and how they would view their roles as informal leaders. As such, based on these assumptions and responses from interviewees, there were some surprises in the data.

Informal Leaders (Generally) Have a Positive Outlook

The most surprising aspect of the data was the overwhelming sentiment from the interviewees that their informal leadership roles enable them to contribute to the greater good in their organization and towards meaningful relationships with colleagues. The contributions of informal leaders may not always be recognized nor appreciated by colleagues or formal leaders. However, despite this, informal leaders still find their

contributions rewarding. Their efforts to leave situations better than they found them are professionally worthwhile.

Along the same lines, there is discussion throughout this Capstone about the positive and negative feedback/observations of informal leaders. Although there is some negative feedback from informal leaders about their roles, the positive impact they experience seems to outweigh the negativity. Informal leaders often express a desire for organizational improvements, but there is not a strong statement from the participants that they regret their role or their actions. There, indeed, were responses from participants that they do experience frustration due to lack of support, growth, recognition, and ability to effect change. However, in general, interviewees did not express a desire to relinquish their informal leader duties despite challenges.

Informal Leaders Are Self-Aware

Also notable was the level of self-awareness expressed in the responses of the participants. Although some interviewees discussed the importance of contributing to the greater good and the positive feelings that inspires, other interviewees were direct about how they felt negatively impacted by their informal leadership role. Others were candid about their own motives and how they strategically use or want to use this informal role to advance in their role as a promotion or for an increase in compensation.

Some participants also discussed their own lack of self-confidence or other insecurities that they have about adequately filling their informal role. Others explained that they need to be a better self-advocate for their professional needs. Most surprising was the discussion of the anxiety or pain from the organization or colleagues that some of the informal leaders observe and try to alleviate.

Informal Leaders Are Seeking Professional Development Support/Opportunities

Also, of note from participants was their interest in and specific feedback about learning from other informal leaders, along with the basic levels of professional support that formal leaders could provide to enhance their informal leadership roles. Interestingly, informal leader participants sought or aspired to a collaboration or leadership opportunity from their supervisor or other formal leader.

Counter to my specific assumption that an inherent part of informal leadership is that each informal leader aspires to be a formal leader, the data do not support this. The participant sample did include some interviewees who had formal leadership responsibilities, but for the most part, most of the interviewees did not span both roles. As such, although there was discussion of career advancement in the form of "promotions," aspiration to rise to a formal leadership position was discussed by a few participants but was not a significant point of discussion as I had assumed it would be.

Informal Leaders Want to Understand More About Informal Leadership

Based on the participant recruitment process, I had an assumption that interviewees were interested in leadership generally and informal leadership more specifically. I did not anticipate responses from participants expressing interest in learning more about informal leadership. As informal leaders, a few participants expressed that they could not say with certainty that they were informal leaders, as their perspective was this title or a designation is bestowed by others rather than self. This is not an aspect of informal leadership that is currently addressed in the literature. Other participants expressed the need for self-assessment tools for informal leaders. Participants expressed gratitude for participation in this exploratory study as they had a better

understanding and appreciation of the informal leadership role and ultimately felt empowered by the research.

How the Findings Relate to the Literature

Shared Themes Between the Data and the Literature

There are shared themes between the participant responses and the literature about informal leadership. There is commonality in four areas from the literature review, including the experience of informal leaders with (a) impact of lack of authority; (b) role of influence; (c) role of expertise; and (d) significance of the positive influence of informal leaders.

Impact of Lack of Authority. Some interviewees directly spoke to the impact of the lack of authority that they have in their role and how this affected them as informal leaders. Still, it was fewer participants than I had assumed would address this topic. In relation to what the informal leaders saw as a negative aspect of being an informal leader, there were four participants who acknowledged feeling "powerless" with a "lack of authority" and the ability to "suggest change but cannot affect it."

Similarly, the literature acknowledges that a significant part of informal leadership is the lack of authority in those roles. Essentially, lack of authority is one of the fundamental characteristics that differentiates informal leadership from formal leadership (Hills, 2014; Ross, 2014; Pielstick, 2000; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). Additionally, as noted by Hills (2014), informal leaders are not in an appointed, authorized position. The interviewee data support these aspects of the literature.

Role of Influence. Informal leaders discussed their organizational influence during the interviews as part of a positive contribution they make through their roles.

Seventeen interviewees, nearly 100 percent, expressed a recognition and understanding of the influence they had as an informal leader. Based on my discussions with the informal leaders, their influential roles were a source of pride and a rewarding aspect of their informal leadership. A portion of the respondents (10) noted that they "channel and direct their influence" to "impact change," "have ideas implemented," and encourage "people to listen."

The literature echoes the participants' sentiment about the influential role of informal leaders. Examples of this include the work of Peters and O'Connor (2001) who refer to informal leaders as "informal influence leaders." The ability of informal leaders to impact their peers is discussed in the literature review (Hills, 2014; Pescosolido, 2001; Schneier & Goktepe, 1983; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). Researchers (Hills, 2014; Krueger, 2013; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014) also discuss the importance of relationships as a part of influence, which is also supported by the interviewees. Informal leader participants (13) expressed how they valued the relationships they were able to build and foster. An additional 6 interviewees talked about their role as relationship-focused individuals. Based on the research, the ability to create connections and build relationships is an essential part of influence.

Role of Expertise. The expertise of the informal leader participants was recognized by both the formal leaders in some of their organizations and the informal leaders themselves. Six (6) informal leaders explained that they were verbally acknowledged or thanked by their formal leader and in one case, they won an award. The informal leaders also acknowledged the role of their experience in their leadership roles. In the interviews, the theme that emerged about the topic of expertise was the informal

leader as the "go-to" person. Most of the interviewees (15) acknowledged that they fulfilled this role. They described themselves as a "point person, leader, unifier, organizer"; as someone who "makes things happen"; as an "expert, subject matter expert"; as someone who "takes initiative"; and lastly as a professional with "a commanding presence." Each of these attributes contributes to the informal leaders being viewed as an expert within the organization.

The literature addresses the expertise of informal leaders, but not as comprehensively as some of the other themes in this research. From the literature, the closest alignment with expertise is an informal leader as a "go-to" person (Ross, 2014). Smart (2010) describes expertise in the informal leader as someone with a "wealth of process information or technical information gained from experience" (p. 28). Expertise is alluded to in this statement but not directly addressed as an attribute of informal leaders. Other researchers, including Harris (2011), Lawson et al. (2018) and Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) acknowledge that expertise alone is not enough to characterize someone as an informal leader. They introduce the concept of gaining trust and maintaining trust from colleagues, along with expertise as a characteristic of informal leadership. This is supported by the interviewees who acknowledged the importance of being relationship focused (6) and a connector/collaborator in their professional role (12).

Significance of the Positive Influence of Informal Leaders. Serving as a positive influence in the organization was one of the highlights of how the interviewees understand their professional role as an informal leader, as well as their view of other colleagues who are informal leaders. There were 18 responses from interviewees indicating that they experienced informal leadership as a positive force in the

organization or the ability to make a positive contribution. Despite the challenges and some of the negative aspects of being an informal leader, the experience was predominately positive for participants. They expressed appreciation for other informal leaders as well as their own ability to be a supportive, caring, and committed colleagues to others. The positive experience for the participants was indicated by how their contributions to the organization made them feel—at times, regardless of how they were recognized or rewarded by the organization. Their experience as informal leaders, although challenging at times, ultimately was positive in some capacity for the interviewees.

The literature also discusses the positive influence of informal leaders. Several researchers note that it is in the best interest of organizations to identify and foster informal leadership opportunities (Downey et al., 2011; Lawson et al., 2018; Miner, 2013; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Pielstick, 2000; Ross, 2014). The value of informal leaders as a positive influence is mostly acknowledged by researchers on teams and at an organizational level. Teams play a significant role in the healthcare industry and provide informal leaders the opportunity to facilitate coordination in fast-paced environments (Lawson et al., 2018). At the organizational level, as Doyle (2002) explains, leadership has become increasingly distributed, with formal and informal leaders leading. Lastly, Ross (2014) states directly, "everyone can benefit from the process of informal leadership" (p. 69), encouraging formal leaders to foster the development of informal leaders in the organization.

Differences in Themes Between the Data and the Literature

There were some notable differences between the participant data and the

literature. This includes the literature's emphasis on informal leadership and its connection to teams; however, there wasn't notable discussion by participants about their interaction with teams. Another difference was the interviewee's feedback about formal leaders and their professional relationship; yet, the literature is lacking in its presentation of the formal and informal leader organizational relationship.

Teams. The topic of teams and the role they have in informal leadership emergence is a significant part of the literature on informal leaders. Teams were less emphasized by the interviewees. Participants addressed teams in the sense that they often spoke of colleagues or formal leaders, which theoretically could be team members. However, what was lacking was a direct acknowledgment or discussion about their informal leadership and its connection with a group or team. Participants were specifically asked about "How do you see yourself (or your role) in groups?" in which more than half (11) of the interviewees indicated that they take on an organizer or leader role in groups. In addition, 9 participants acknowledged that they serve in a collaborative role in groups or teams. The take-away from this data is that this group of informal leaders plays an active, constructive role in groups. The literature, however, puts an additional emphasis on the connection between teams and informal leadership, which was lacking in these interviews.

From the research perspective, teams are an essential part of the development and emergence of informal leaders. This may be due, in part, to the current research about informal leadership that is based in the healthcare field. The model for healthcare is distributed leadership, including those with informal roles (Lee & Cummings, 2008). Some researchers acknowledge the existence of formal and informal organizations. A

formal organization would be represented by an organizational chart, whereas the informal organization, as discussed by Smart (2010), is "behind the scenes" (p. 73). Smart argues it is in this informal structure that informal leaders thrive, as they can execute and facilitate. Further, Carte et al. (2006) state that self-managed teams may rely on the emergence of an informal leader. This is a mutually beneficial relationship for the informal leader, who assumes the leadership role, and the team, who is best able to determine who is qualified for this role.

Formal and Informal Leader Relationships. Another difference between the interviews and the literature was the focus of participants on their relationship and interactions with formal leaders. Yet, this topic was not a significant part of the literature about informal leadership.

Feedback from the participants about formal leaders was a theme that was woven throughout the interviews. They were asked the following question, "How do you see the formal leaders in your organization?" and nearly every question elicited some feedback about formal leadership, both positive and negative. Positive comments about formal leaders included viewing them as being inspirational or transformational (5); having effective interpersonal skills (4); and possessing strong job skills (2). However, the negative feedback about formal leaders outweighed the positive feedback. Negative comments included acknowledging that their formal leadership was uninspiring or ineffective (17), followed by a lack of interpersonal skills and professionalism (14). Overall, the takeaway is that the informal leader participants had much to say about their formal leadership.

However, the research covered in the literature review did not primarily focus on the informal and formal leader relationship. Pielstick's work (2000) examines, via a mail survey, the characteristics of formal versus informal leaders. Nonetheless, there isn't discussion of the dynamics between both roles. Other researchers present the informal and formal leadership relationship in the form of advice to formal leaders about how to identify, engage with, and benefit from informal leadership in their organizations (Downey et al., 2011; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Ross, 2014; Smart, 2010). Conversely, Hills (2014) and Krueger (2013) discuss the possible negative experiences that formal leaders may encounter with informal leaders through direct interaction. Hills (2014) discusses how to identify and develop informal leaders in her work but also includes a section in the article titled, "How to deal effectively with informal leaders who oppose you." The author appears to be preparing formal leaders for potentially negative interpersonal interactions with informal leaders. A specific suggestion offered by Hills (2014) is "when all else fails, render the informal leader useless by ramping up your own leadership" (p. 200). Krueger (2013) also discusses the potential for informal leaders to resist change, but her analysis is presented from a change management perspective rather than a focus on the relationship between the formal and informal leader.

Gaps in Themes Between the Data and the Literature

There were two significant gaps between the participant data and the literature review. One is the actual interview format of this Capstone, and the other is some of the challenging experiences of informal leaders in their role.

Capstone Interview Format. To date I have not found another research study with the same approach as this Capstone, which is first-person interviews with informal

leaders. This Capstone's research question *"How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?"* specifically seeks to understand the attributes that informal leaders possess based on their experience as informal leaders. Each of the interview questions was crafted to learn more about the informal leader participants and their firsthand experience as informal leaders. It was also an important part of the methods used in this Capstone to conduct the interviews face-to-face to not only collect the responses directly, but also to observe the participants' expressions and body language, while being able to record their data and the context in which it was presented.

The literature primarily touches on characteristics of informal leaders from the perspective of researchers, the organization, the formal leader or colleagues (mostly in the form of teams). This includes observations about the informal leader as an individual and focuses on topics such as the "characteristics of informal leaders" (Hills, 2014, p. 198), "qualities found in informal leaders" or "how informal leaders view themselves" (Downey, p. 519). The work of Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) may be most closely aligned with this Capstone in that they sought to learn more about the qualities or perceived qualities of informal leaders. They used a questionnaire to determine from participants whether "they had experienced or observed informal leadership" as defined by their study. Their study was larger (41 participants) than this Capstone's small, exploratory study. It sought more general information and descriptions of informal leadership and informal leaders than the interviews conducted directly with self-identified informal leaders for this Capstone.

Informal Leaders' Challenging Experiences. As explained earlier in this chapter, the interview data showed that informal leaders (generally) have a positive outlook about

their roles and do have positive experiences as informal leaders. However, throughout the interviews, some participants shared the more challenging or isolating effects of their informal leadership, including lack of clarity around their informal leader role (8); the role of risk they sometimes assume as an informal leader (4); and the anxiety or pain they relieve for others as an informal leader (3).

Overall, the literature does not present current, firsthand accounts from informal leaders. Consequently, challenging and isolating aspects of this role are not discussed by researchers. The informal leadership insights in this Capstone are directly from those doing this work each day. Although this study had only a small sample of interviewees, the consistency of their responses about informal leadership challenges make the data notable. Smart (2010) and Downey et al. (2011) are two authors who address these issues about informal leaders in their work, in some capacity. In general, the literature talks about informal leaders as a commodity for organizations to expend rather than a group of professionals who could benefit from support and development in the organization.

<u>Limitations</u>

There were a few limitations of this study. This includes the size of the participant sample. Although I exceeded my original target of 15 participants, with 18 total interviewees, the sample size is small. Also, there was limited diversity among the participants in both gender and race. This was due in part to relying on my professional and educational network to recruit participants. The participants were primarily female and primarily white. The study was also dominated by participants who work in higher education. This was expected since the criteria for participants focused on employment at Drexel University or enrollment as a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Practice Implications

A significant take away from this exploratory study was that the general sentiment from the participants was that they hoped that their feedback (positive or negative) could be constructive for other informal leaders, formal leaders, and organizations. The participants were open about their professional backgrounds and were grateful to have a platform to share their experiences. As such, there are practical steps that organizations can take based on this study.

Recognize Informal Leadership

When discussing the topic of this Capstone, often with people in leadership positions, they were unfamiliar with the concept of informal leadership. Organizations could be better served if they educated their teams about informal leadership as a type of leadership and what it entails. Naming and acknowledging this type of leadership would be a constructive first step towards recognizing and developing current and future informal leaders.

Create a Medium for Formal and Informal Leaders to Connect

One of the themes of the Capstone was about the impact that formal leaders have on informal leaders. A next step would be to acknowledge these dynamics and begin a dialog about how to strengthen these relationships for both the professionals and the organization. Formal leaders could benefit from feedback from informal leaders about the value of their support or their ability to inspire. Informal leaders could benefit from acknowledgment of their work by formal leaders and the opportunity to ask for help when needed. It is probably safe to assume most organizations do not have mechanisms

in place for those who are informal leaders without formal authority to have a safe, open dialog with those in positions of formal authority or recognized leadership.

Examine the Effectiveness of Both Formal and Informal Leaders

Based on themes in this Capstone that examine the value of informal leaders to organizations, it could be a meaningful exercise to examine how formal and informal leaders can complement one another with their leadership strengths. Are there ways in which each type of leader can assist the other to be more efficient and effective in their role? Examples of the effective uses of the skills of informal leaders include serving as a liaison to colleagues during periods of change management (Krueger, 2013; Peters & O'Connor, 2001, Smart, 2010) or serving as an informal leader and connector to increase the effectiveness of teams (Lawson et al., 2018; Pescosolido, 2001; Smart, 2010). Are there other circumstances when the leadership of an informal leader could be effectively used? It is a question for formal leaders and organizations to consider.

Recognize the Demands on Formal Leaders to Support Informal Leaders

As Hill (2004) argues, managers today are operating under increased organizational demands. This includes having many direct reports or, at times, reporting to multiple bosses. The ability to identify and mentor informal leaders on a team can assist managers not only with creating a pipeline for professional development for individual employees, but also contributing to a learning-based organizational culture, one which capitalizes on the unique talents of each employee. Hill (2004) advocates that managers and leaders have a responsibility to be "coaches and architects of their organizational cultures" and have a willingness to "lead from the front" but more

importantly to "lead from behind." Investing in informal leaders and their leadership is one way to make this contribution.

Use Informal Leaders to Mentor and Train Their Colleagues

Given the feedback from the interviewees about the pride they take in their informal leadership role and the importance of the contribution to the greater good while connecting with their colleagues, organizations could invest in a near-peer model for informal leaders to mentor their colleagues. This model could benefit both formal and informal leaders. It could alleviate some administrative demands on formal leaders and create professional development opportunities for informal leaders, along with strengthening peer-to-peer relationships.

Support Informal Leaders

As this Capstone found, based on firsthand accounts from informal leaders, they act in these informal roles with minimal expectations about how they will be recognized or rewarded. When they aren't recognized or valued, the effects can be demoralizing for the informal leader. When they are recognized and rewarded, however, the benefits can be long lasting for both the informal and formal leaders. In addition, informal leaders, and others in organizations who continuously take on responsibilities and, in some cases, the anxiety and burden of those in formal authority, need to be taken care of to support their professional and personal well-being as valued contributors.

This Capstone has revealed that there are pragmatic ways for formal and informal leaders to work together in a productive and supportive manner. Now, it is up to organizations to recognize the value of both types of leadership and leaders and create the infrastructure to invest in their leadership.

<u>Future Research</u>

The future research opportunities for learning more about informal leaders and their leadership are abundant. This was made clear by the interviewees who expressed interest in learning more about informal leadership and were encouraged by the focus of this Capstone. Based on my research question, *"How do informal leaders view and understand their role as informal leaders?"* there are areas for more research that emerged as a result of the literature review and the interview data.

Expand the Scale of this Study

A tangible area for more research about this topic is to expand the work of this small, exploratory study. Given the scope of this Capstone, along with the timeline and available resources, the participant pool was primarily limited to participants in the field of higher education. A next step would be to expand the number of informal leaders in corporate or other non-profit roles. A closer look at company size could also be considered in how it may impact the informal leader's role. Additionally, informal leadership could be examined by gender to determine if the experiences for males and females are similar or different. With the significance of informal leadership to the healthcare field (Downey et al., 2011; Hills, 2014; Krueger, 2013; Lawson et al., 2018; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Ross, 2014), it could be meaningful to replicate and expand this study to interview nurses and other healthcare workers, since there is a foundation of informal leadership research to build on.

Explore Informal Leaders Seeking Formal Authority

Revisiting one of my assumptions at the start of this Capstone, my impression was that most informal leaders are seeking formal leadership positions. Theoretically, it could be possible for informal leaders to use their positions as a path to a position with formal

authority. Based on this study and its scale, the results are still inconclusive. Additionally, this is a gap in the literature. My interest in informal leaders pursuing formal leadership roles is partly related to understanding the professional interests and motivation of informal leaders. Also, it may be worthwhile to explore if informal leadership can provide a leadership pipeline for organizations or is informal leadership its own entity, one which may or may not lead to career advancement.

Understand the Duality of Leadership

As discussed earlier in this Capstone, as a researcher going through this discovery process, I have gained a better understanding of the complexity of informal leadership. Because the definitions of informal leadership continue to evolve, an area for further study is the duality of formal and informal leadership. Only discussed briefly in the literature by Oh et al. (2006) and Wren (2005), this leadership dynamic asserts that formal leaders may also have and use aspects of informal leadership in their role. Also, as Hill (2004) explains, managers are being asked to do more, including, in some cases, reporting to multiple supervisors. I assert that informal leadership capabilities may be more effective than formal authority alone. As leadership becomes increasingly distributed and sought at each organizational level (Burns, 1978; Hill, 2014; Miner, 2013; Pescosolido, 2001; Peters & O'Connor, 2001; Pielstick, 2000; Ross, 2014; Smart, 2010; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014), a better understanding of the benefits of informal leadership to formal leaders in their roles could be impactful to individuals, teams, and organizations, alike.

Examine the Concept of Positional or Situational Leadership

Related to the concept of distributed leadership, researchers, including Harris (2011) and Hemphill (1961), discuss leadership and the shift from viewing leadership as a "position" to a "situation" or "interaction." More research could be undertaken to put a finer point on this aspect of informal leadership. The question could be framed as: Are people acting as informal leaders or are they responding to specific situations, in the moment, and exercising a leadership role? Alternatively, do leadership "situations" or "interactions" present themselves in the workplace, or are these opportunities generated by and/or acted on by informal leaders? It may be worth a closer look to better understand the cause and effect of this leadership action.

Analyze Informal Leadership and Power

The words "leadership" and "power" are often used synchronously, particularly in terms of formal leadership and assigned authority. Informal leadership and power are also worthy of investigation. Hills (2014) and Smart (2010) review aspects of informal leadership and power. Both researchers discuss informal leadership and the use of expert power/credibility, as well as referent power and the ability of informal leaders to use social or political influence with their network. As discussed previously, expertise and influence are aspects of informal leadership discussed in the literature and by interviewees, alike. Future research could look at other aspects of power that informal leaders may be able to exercise. In addition, the power dynamics between formal and informal leaders could be explored.

Although there is more research to do about informal leadership, and most specifically, understanding the experiences of informal leaders in their leadership roles,

the foundation has been established for continuing this work. Not only will research specific to informal leadership benefit organizations and employees, it will also move all forms of leadership research to the next level with new and exciting professional development possibilities.

Conclusion

Although there is more research to do about informal leadership, and most specifically, understanding the experiences of informal leaders in their leadership roles, this Capstone has helped to establish a base for continuing this work. The work of this Capstone has been a meaningful and personal undertaking for me. My role as an informal leader has been one of the most impactful experiences I have had as an individual and a professional. For as long as I can remember, I have felt compelled to discuss this leadership experience and educate others about it. It has simultaneously presented me with challenges and offered me opportunities. At times, it has been a lonely leadership existence wondering if others had a similar reality to mine. Yet, my passion for informal leadership has never wavered. The trials and tribulations I have encountered as an informal leader formed the foundation of the formal leader that I am today.

My most significant breakthrough came when I realized through my Organizational Dynamics coursework that it is a recognized form of leadership. The impact of having this form of leadership named with definitive characteristics cannot be underestimated. It was an aha! moment that sparked my curiosity to learn more about informal leaders. Even with all the knowledge I have gained throughout this Capstone process, the curiosity remains. There is still more to learn about how to recognize informal leadership, understand those in these roles, and share the benefits with both

individuals and organizations. My informal leadership journey will continue beyond this

Capstone. In fact, I feel as though I'm just getting started.

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APPENDIX A

Email to Recruit Interview Participants

I'm seeking to interview participants for a research project at the University of

Pennsylvania about informal leaders and their leadership.

Informal leaders can be defined as "individuals without formal title or authority

who serve as advocates for the organization and heighten the contributions of others as

well as their own, primarily through influence, relationship-building, knowledge and

expertise" (Smart, 2010, p. 28).

Interviews will be face-to-face and be scheduled on Drexel University's campus.

The interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

To participate in the interview process, you must—
- See yourself as an informal leader
- Have a minimum of 3 years' professional employment experience
- Be a current employee of Drexel University with a minimum of 3 years' employment experience at the University
- Be a current graduate student or alumnus in the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania and currently employed in an organization with a minimum of 3 years' experience in one organization

The interview responses and any identifying information gathered will be confidential.

Participation in the process is voluntary. The results of this research study may be used in

reports, presentations, and publications, but at no time will any individual be identified.

Please contact Marie Fazio to participate or if you have any questions.

APPENDIX B

<u>Interview Questions</u>

Hello. My name is Marie Fazio. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. Does this time still work for you? As you know from the e-mail you received, I am interviewing professional staff at Drexel University, along with graduate students from the University of Pennsylvania to learn more about informal leaders and their leadership in organizations. I am conducting these interviews to fulfill the Capstone requirement of the Organizational Dynamics Program at the University of Pennsylvania. I am a graduate student in the Master of Science Program. This interview is confidential, and I will not disclose what you tell me. However, I will be compiling a research paper that will identify the major themes from the interviews and I may use some quotes from the interviews. The quotes will not be attributed to any specific person and if a quote is recognizable, we will not use it. The interview will last about 45 minutes to 1 hour. Do you have that amount of time to speak with me? I will be recording the interview. Do I have your permission to do so? Before we start do you have any questions?

1. Tell me about a time that you took on an informal leadership role?

2. As an informal leader, how do you view and understand your role within your organization?

3. What is the catalyst for you to "step up"?

4. As an informal leader, what motivates you to act in this capacity?

5. How do you see yourself (or your role) in groups?

6. Are there other informal leaders in your organization? What is your view of them?

7. How do you see the formal leaders in your organization?

8. How do you know you're an informal leader?

9. How have you been recognized for this role by your organization? Rewarded?

10. Do you have any additional thoughts about your role as an informal leader that I did not cover?