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Kristina E. Kovacs  
kkovacs21@gmail.com

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**CAREER TRAJECTORY AND LEADERSHIP:  
THE ROLE OF PERSONAL ADVERSITY**

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**A Research Project  
Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graziadio Business School  
Pepperdine University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science  
In  
Organization Development**

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**by  
Kristina E. Kovacs**

**July 2020**

This research project, completed by

KRISTINA KOVACS

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
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Faculty Committee

Committee Chair, Darren Good, PhD

Committee Member, Christopher Worley, PhD

Deryck J. van Rensburg, Dean  
The Graziadio Business School

## **Abstract**

Adversity is part of life and certainly contributes to human development. This study seeks to explore the impact of personal adversity on career trajectory and leadership. A qualitative study based on 12 interviews with a narrative approach is presented. Key themes were identified among high-level executives around career evolution, perception of leadership, and how those experiences impacted their way of leading. The study concludes with a brief discussion of limitations and the findings that raise questions for additional research and provide some support for leadership and career development, counseling, and training.

*Keywords:* adversity, human development, career trajectory, leadership

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Media outlets tend to focus more heavily on leaders' positive qualities and daily routines as fundamental contributions to career success. To this day, psychologists have not sorted out which traits define leaders or if leadership exists outside of specific situations, and yet we know with absolute certainty that a handful of people have changed millions of lives and reshaped the world (Bennis, 2007). Previous research suggests leaders are challenged regularly by today's rapidly changing world, new technologies, globalization, the competitive landscape, scale up, and profitability (Powell & Baker, 2014).

Bennis and Thomas (2002) concluded that one of the most reliable indicators and predictors of true leadership is an individual's ability to find meaning in negative events and to learn from even the most trying circumstances. Through their interviews with top level executives, they highlighted examples of overcoming adversity. For example, Sidney Harman became a pioneer of participative management after workers rebelled in one of his factories. Liz Altman became a Motorola vice president after being transformed by the year spent at a Sony factory in rural Japan, where she faced estrangement and sexism. Muriel ("Mickie") Siebert, could not get a job as a stockbroker until she took her first name off of her resume and substituted a genderless initial; she then went on to become the first woman to own a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. While these stories are intriguing, there remains a lack of empirical research on the impacts of personal adversity experienced by leaders. Leadership literature has focused primarily on adversity or trauma experienced in the workplace as a consequence of the volatile nature of current affairs or the ever-changing competitive landscape of business,

while largely ignoring personal adversity. It is now commonly acknowledged that we bring our whole selves to work. People can use varying degrees of their selves (i.e., physically, cognitively, and emotionally) in the roles they perform, even as they maintain the integrity of the boundaries between who they are and the roles they occupy (Kahn, 1990). By further investigating the implications of personal adversity, we may discover that leveraging learnings from those experiences (e.g., an ill child, divorce, poverty, or death of a loved one) may have in fact primed us to tackle professional challenges.

Adversity refers to negative experiences that have the possibility to disturb a person's adaptive function or development (Yates & Masten, 2004). Research on adversity in individuals has produced a robust body of evidence consistently and, in some cases, prospectively, associating various predictors with actual individual resilient outcomes (Bonanno, Romero, & Klein, 2015). Adversity research has typically been focused on vulnerable populations, such as children, women, transgender, prisoners, etc. Research conducted by Mittal and colleagues (2015) indicates that adverse childhood environments do not universally impair mental functioning but can actually enhance specific types of cognitive performance in adults in the face of uncertainty.

We have not studied adversity experiences with leaders outside of the workplace and how those experiences may have impacted their career trajectory and leadership. How and why have these individuals not only survived but thrived under adverse conditions? How have prior experiences with personal adversity provided insight or tools for the demands of their career?

This study investigates the role personal adversity may have in supporting the careers and leadership among high-level executives. Leadership is grounded in a



relationship. In its simplest form, it is a tripod—a leader or leaders, followers, and the common goal they want to achieve. None of those three elements can survive without the others (Bennis, 2007). Many people are exposed to loss or potentially traumatic events at some point in their lives, and yet they continue to have positive emotional experiences and show only minor and transient disruptions in their ability to function (Bonanno, 2004). Not everyone copes with these potentially disturbing events in the same way. Some people experience acute distress from which they are unable to recover. Others suffer less intensely and for a much shorter period of time (Bonanno, 2004).

When faced with adversity people respond in a range of ways. Positive organizational scholarship “investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in especially favorable ways,” (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 1). and “identifies the dynamics leading to exceptional individual organizational performance” (p. 1). Rather than draw the line between what is bad and what is good, the positive lens encourages scholars to explore what may be positive about seemingly neutral or even negative states, and how to transform conditions that are truly negative into those that are positive. Positive emotions and positive affect are intertwined and can be leveraged during times of personal adversity. Because positive emotions include a component of positive affect, positive emotions function as an internal signal to approach or continue (Fredrickson, 2001).

Resilience generally indicates how well an individual resists threats and how quickly they return to the initial state after a disturbance. In psychological research, resilience refers to individual strengths and can be defined as the ability of individuals to withstand stress and cope with pressure (Duchek, 2017). Research conducted by Bond

and Shaprio (2014) concluded that resilience was vital for career success — it is in the top three career success factors for our most senior interviewees. It is also learnable and should be an integral part of leadership development for the future.

Posttraumatic growth describes the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the struggle with the crises occurred (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth is not simply a return to baseline-it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Prescod and Zeligman (2018) conducted a study among 215 undergraduate students on career adaptability of trauma survivors. They found a significant, positive relationship coupled with the predictive nature of intrusion symptoms, suggesting that experiencing trauma and negative trauma symptomatology might allow individuals greater career adaptability. Specifically, posttraumatic growth may buffer against negative trauma symptoms and might bring a sense of resiliency related to thriving in one's career.

Adversity is part of life and certainly contributes to human development. For over a decade, I have been the right-hand to C-suite leadership acting as an executive assistant and evolving to chief of staff. I have experienced, as a bystander, without full understanding the way adversity impacts leaders. I intend to address the gap in the research by exploring adversity among high-level leaders as it relates to personal experiences, leadership, and career trajectory. My hypothesis is that leaders are multifaceted and by learning how they may have made sense of their adversity and applied those experiences toward their careers and leadership, I will be able to add to the conversation of how we portray leaders. I will supplement leadership profiles beyond the

media's superficial routines by providing diverse examples for future leaders to identify with.

In addition, this study provides opportunities to add to research on leadership development and training programs and will have relevant application by identifying behaviors and/or mindsets for potential training techniques for current and future leaders, whether recent graduates entering the workforce or those looking to change or advance their career.

### **Purpose Statement**

This study investigates the role personal adversity may have in supporting the careers and leadership among high-level executives including C-suite, Partner, President, or Founder. Three main research questions were examined:

- How have experiences with adversity affected your career trajectory?
- How have experiences with adversity affected you as a leader?
- To what do you attribute your ability to grow from adversity?

### **Study Setting**

This study was conducted in offices, private meeting locations of the leaders' choosing, or virtually. The flexibility with location was to accommodate the participants' rigid schedules. The industries vary among the leaders interviewed, the range included legal, venture capital, consulting, ecommerce, entertainment, and retail. The strategy of inquiry for data collection were interviews with a narrative approach.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 provided the background and significance for the study including hypothesis, purpose, and study setting. Chapter 2 focuses on a deeper review of existing

literature on adversity, leadership, and different ways in which people respond to adversity including positive scholarship, positive emotions, resilience, and posttraumatic growth. Chapter 3 describes the methods used to conduct the present study including research design, procedures for recruiting participants, confidentiality, consent, data collection, and analyzing. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, including conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter provides a review of literature related to the study. The first body of literature reviewed is on adversity for the purpose of providing context for the study. Next, leadership is reviewed with attention on the leader as an individual and the various behaviors, styles, and methods of leadership with a specific frame of reference in mind that current developments such as digitalization, globalization, and the omnipresence of crisis pose great challenges for leaders. They must be able to anticipate potential threats, to cope effectively with critical situations, and to adapt to changing environments. Even more, they need to be able to use any changes for further development in order to grow despite crisis (Duchek, 2017). And, finally, various ways in which people have responded to adversity with a focus on positive scholarship including positive emotions, resilience, and posttraumatic growth.

### **Adversity**

Adversity is part of life and certainly contributes to human development. Adversity refers to negative experiences that have the possibility to disturb a person's adaptive function or development (Yates & Masten, 2004). Adversities may be chronic (e.g., poverty, racism) or acute (e.g., sudden loss of a loved one, victim of an armed robbery). They may affect systems within the individual (e.g., a virus that attacks the immune system) or multiple levels and settings simultaneously (e.g., a natural disaster that affects individual systems of stress, beliefs, and behaviors, as well as broader systems of family, school, health care, agriculture, etc.) (Yates, Tyrell, & Masten, 2014).

Educational administrators see adversity as their constant companion. The conditions of adversity are clearer and more visible to administrators and teachers of

administration; they are implicit in such phrases as “declining enrollments,” “diminished resources,” “loss of confidence,” and “accountability and assessment” (Culbertson, 2001).

Previous research indicates that adverse childhood environments do not universally impair mental functioning but can actually enhance specific types of cognitive performance in the face of uncertainty (Mittal, Griskevicius, Simpson, Sung, & Young, 2015). If, for example, a person grows up in an unpredictable and constantly changing environment, he or she ought to develop cognitive tendencies that help him or her function adaptively in this type of challenging environment. When tested in conditions of uncertainty (conditions reminiscent of their early life environments), adults exposed to more unpredictable childhood environments outperform those exposed to more predictable childhood environments on the executive function of shifting.

Rather than impairing cognitive functioning, Mittal et al.(2015) suggest people who had more unpredictable childhoods were worse at inhibition (overriding dominant responses), but better at shifting (efficiently switching between different tasks) when tested in conditions of uncertainty. Unpredictable environments, such as startups, where trends, new technology, and venture capital cash injections can cause unpredictable patterns of competition or vested interest, individuals “programmed” by unpredictable childhood experiences to identify new and better opportunities may be more likely to not only survive but thrive in these arduous environments.

## **Leadership**

Today, the field of leadership focuses not only on the leader, but also on followers, peers, supervisors, work setting/context, and culture, including a much broader

array of individuals representing the entire spectrum of diversity, public, private, and not-for-profit organizations, and, increasingly over the past 20 years, samples of populations from nations around the globe (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). The focus of this review is on the hardship's leaders experience, traits they exhibit, and coping mechanisms they leverage both personally and professionally to create appropriate context for the study. In the early 19th and 20th centuries, theories asserted that leadership qualities were inherited, especially by people from upper class. "Great men" were born, not made (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991).

The study of leader traits has a long and controversial history. While research shows that the possession of certain traits alone does not guarantee leadership success, there is evidence that effective leaders are different from other people in certain key respects (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Trait theories continue to be controversial since research showed that no traits were universally associated with effective leadership and situational factors were also influential.

Bennis and Thomas (2002) interviewed more than 40 leaders, young and old. They found that all of these leaders identified one very intense, transformational experience that they believed was critical to their leadership. Some of these personal "crucible" experiences were extremely positive (e.g., climbing a mountain), and others were tragic (e.g., loss of a child or being imprisoned for 16 years.) As a result of these crucible experiences, these leaders acquired a critical adaptive capacity that contributed to their success. Researchers define the extent of career adaptability as a reflection of an individual's self-concept, perceptions about life, anxious response, and mood, which are

also affected by employment stability (Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013).

To perform effectively in complex mission environments, security personnel and leaders must be flexible and adaptable in responding to rapidly changing conditions. Psychological hardiness marks resilient people who maintain their health and performance despite stressful situations (Barton, Kelly, & Matthews, 2013). People define career resilience both as an in-the-moment response to set-backs and crisis, and as a long-term behavior. Four out of five people define resilience as “recovering well from set-backs” (Bond & Shaprio, 2014, p. 4), but 64% also said it is about the ability to adapt well to change, and 61% said it is about being tenacious/keeping on going.

Although there is a lack of empirical research, the transformational leadership literature suggests that exposure to trauma has both positive and negative impacts on leadership and leadership development. Transformational leaders stimulate thought by soliciting input of others, encouraging followers to challenge old ways of operation, view problems from a new perspective, participate in developing new, more efficient work processes, and overcome resistance to change (McClellan, Levitt, & DiClementi, 2017).

The ability to lead is related to the emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being of the leader. Trauma, whether witnessed or resulting in personal injury, has the potential to alter leaders’ wellbeing and change their outward leadership behaviors (Kramer & Allen, 2018). Leaders are obviously human beings with the full range of moods and emotions potentially available to them. Both positive and negative moods and emotions serve numerous functions in people’s lives. Likewise, both positive and negative moods and emotions can sometimes be the cause of human dysfunction, and therefore, emotional



intelligence may be a key contributor to leadership effectiveness (George, 2000). For example, a leader who is surprised when fear and anxiety are followers' initial reaction to an announced restructuring (even with a guarantee of no layoffs) is not knowledgeable about the determinants of emotions (George, 2000).

Prior empirical studies have confirmed the assertion that employees' attitudinal and behavioral reactions to change play a major role in its success. Shin, Taylor, and Seo's (2012) research on organizational change indicates managers who are concerned about their employees' commitment to change should consider psychological resilience as one criterion for the selection of new employees and as content for training interventions.

Leaders need to manage emotions such that followers are aware of problems yet, given the collective vision, are confident about resolving problems and feel optimistic about the efficacy of their personal contributions (George, 2000). In organizational studies, there has been a growing interest in applying the principles and methodology of positive scholarship to micro and macro-level organizational issues. Within organizational studies, the positive perspective has sharpened the focus on positive states (e.g., authenticity, optimal performance, engagement, thriving, high-quality connections, social responsibility, sustained peace, dynamic capabilities) and their generative mechanisms (e.g., empowerment, trust, creativity, humanistic work ideology) (Roberts, 2006).

The leadership literature, like the positive psychology literature, indicates that positively making meaning of life's difficult moments contributes in positive ways to one's life and to the impact that life will have on an organization. Conflict researchers

have mainly focused on task conflict and negative emotions. Todorova, Weingart, and Bear (2013) drew on affect events theory which suggests that events (such as conflicts) can have either positive or negative effects on peoples' emotions depending on whether they appraise them positively or negatively. Todorova et al. (2013) suggest that task conflict expressed with mild intensity leads to positive, energizing emotions. For example, founders who defined a situation as an opportunity simultaneously embraced the adversity, those who defined it as a challenge sought to counter the adversity, and those who defined a situation as a threat attempted to accommodate the adversity (Powell & Baker, 2014).

The leadership literature continues to evolve as the world becomes more complex, therefore, it is necessary to take a more holistic view of leadership. Researchers are now examining all angles of leadership, including models and studies of the leader, the follower, the context, the levels, and their dynamic interaction as well as the process of leadership (e.g., integrating cognitive psychology with strategic leadership) (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Research to date on adversity has been limited by focused studies on industry or population. This study investigates how high-level leaders may have made sense of their adversity, grown from it, and now apply it to their leadership.

### **Responding to Adversity**

When faced with adversity, people respond in a range of ways. For the purpose of this study I have chosen to focus on positive scholarship including positive emotions, resilience, and post-traumatic growth.

**Positive scholarship including positive emotions.** A growing number of researchers have helped us understand that organizations are most vibrant and alive when

they embrace the tensions of the human condition (Bright, 2009). Rather than focus on the paradoxical dark side of positive scholarship alluded to by Roberts (2006), as an elusive ploy to exploit the powerless through rhetoric of positive scholarship to drive people to work harder, give more, and commit fully, for the purpose of this study and its focus on high-level leaders' experiences with personal adversity and the impact it has had on them professionally, I will focus on the more humble side, that positive scholars seek to ignite and nurture an individual's potential for intrinsic, positive valuations, even though the goal may be external to the actor (Fineman, 2006).

Positive organizational scholarship is an area of study that categorizes previous research and provides an organizing frame for current and future research on positive states, outcomes, and generative mechanics in individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, and societies (Roberts, 2006). Building extraordinary organizations is not a matter of focusing exclusively on the positive; it is a matter of understanding how so-called "positive forces" (e.g., creativity, innovation, positive emotions, etc.) function in dynamic relationship with so-called "negative forces" (e.g., negative emotions, conflict, etc.). Healthy organizations are not characterized by an absence of negativity; rather, they generate a nurturing climate in which experiences of all colors from positive to negative can be harnessed to sustain and perpetuate flourishing organization life (Bright, Powley, Fry, & Barrett, 2013).

The initial intent of positive scholarship was to discover the mechanisms that enable human flourishing; the call for positive scholarship was grounded in an implicit desire to enhance the quality of life for individuals who work within and are affected by organizations (Roberts, 2006). Positive emotions and positive affect are intertwined and

can be leveraged during times of personal adversity. Because positive emotions include a component of positive affect, they too function as internal signals to approach or continue. Even so, positive emotions share this function with a range of other positive affective states (Fredrickson, 2001).

Positive emotions arise in response to diffuse opportunities rather than narrowly focused threats. Positive emotions momentarily broaden people's attention and thinking, enabling them to draw on higher-level connections and a wider-than-usual range of percepts or ideas (Fredrickson, Coffey, Pek, Cohn, & Finkel, 2008). Researchers (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; McClellan, Levitt, & DiClementi, 2017) see positive emotions as active ingredients in superior coping and thriving despite adversity. Studies suggest that in moments of crisis positive emotions do more than feel good in the moment. Fredrickson et al. (2003) studied resilience and emotions following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001. They suggest that through experiences of positive emotions, people may literally transform themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, socially integrated, healthy, and resilient individuals.

Drawing on advocates of emotional intelligence, Mayer and Salovey (1993) defined emotional intelligence:

A type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions. The scope of emotional intelligence includes the verbal and nonverbal appraisal and expression of emotion, the regulation of

emotion in the self and others, and controversy the utilization of emotional content in problem solving. (p. 433)

Leaders use emotion to increase their ability to motivate, inspire, and influence followers in an interpersonal manner that takes into consideration both the need to overcome negative emotions as well as the power associated with promoting positive emotions (McClellan, Levitt, & DiClementi, 2017). Research has linked positive moods to creativity that suggests when leaders are in positive moods, they may be more creative and more likely to come up with a compelling vision that contrasts with the existing conditions. Therefore, it may be possible that such leaders are also likely to be better able to repair negative moods arising from any number of sources that may limit flexibility. Therefore, a case could be made that leaders who have experienced adverse circumstances may draw upon positive emotions for creative roadmaps toward balance or potential growth from trauma (George, 2000).

**Resilience.** Although the term resilience has been in broad use for centuries, it was only in the past several decades that it gained currency as a psychological construct (Bonanno, Romero, & Klein, 2015). Resilience is usually considered to be an ability to go on with life after hardship and adversity, or to continue living a purposeful life after experiencing hardship and adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Resilience, whether it is defined in terms of capacity, processes, or outcomes of positive adaptation in contexts of risks, will depend on the coaction of multiple systems as they come together in the function or development of the individual (Masten, 2015).

Resilience appears to be a common phenomenon arising from ordinary human adaptive processes. Human adaptation and development are shaped by many interactions

across levels, ranging from the molecular level to social and ecological systems. Therefore the development of a child or adult, including that person's potential or manifested resilience, will be influenced by many interactions within the individual (e.g., genetic, neural, immunological, cognitive) and also between the person and the environment, including interactions with family, peers, school, community, and the natural and built environment (Masten, 2015). Resilience is a superordinate construct subsuming two distinct dimensions -- significant adversity and positive adaptation -- and thus is never directly measured, but rather is indirectly inferred based on evidence of the two subsumed constructs (Luthar, 2006).

Prior research from Bonanno, Romero, and Klein (2015) discuss the evolution of resilience and its distinction between acute and chronic circumstances. In the general sense, the category of acute adversity describes a relatively isolated but potentially traumatic life event that demands resources and/ results in the loss of resources and exerts its primary impact over a relatively transient period, usually no longer than one month. By contrast, chronic adversity involves an event or related series of events that exerts repeated and cumulative impact on resources and adaptation and persists for many months and typically considerably longer (Bonanno, Romero, & Klein, 2015).

Individuals are not considered resilient if there has never been a significant threat to their development; there must be current or past hazards judged to have the potential to derail normative development (Masten, 2001). Resilience has been studied across various adverse circumstances from refugees, former child soldiers, and bereavement, to those suffering from chronic distress, recurrent intrusive memories, or sadness from years after exposure to an adverse event.

Resilience manifests in different ways. A study of Cambodian refugee survivors of the Khmer Rouge period found the resilient did not lose the consciousness of their participation or their responsibility for their own lives and destinies (Overland, 2011). They refused to become victims and reaffirmed their self-reliance both by working, by fighting for freedom, and by struggling not to give up. For those coping with the death of a spouse, resilient people were better able than less resilient participants to gain comfort from talking or thinking about the spouse, reported the fewest regrets about their behavior with the spouse, and reported fewer things they may have done or failed to do when they were still alive. Resilient individuals were less likely to search in order to make sense of or find meaning in the spouse's death (Mancini & Bonanno, 2006). Bond and Shapiro (2014) conducted a study on women, resilience, and their career success and found that 76% of people at Board level said that resilience is essential to career success, but only 10% of people at any level say that their organization placed a lot of emphasis on building and maintaining resilience as a factor in career success

Time is essential in thinking about resilience because adaptation unfolds over it. The patterning of adaptation through time is shaped by many influences, all of which can interact and change. These include the patterns of challenge or adversity exposure in time, fluctuating functions of the individual at many levels that could function to moderate responses to challenges, the ebb and flow of resources and relationships that could support adaptation at many levels, and change in the contexts of life, including many aspects of home, family, school, community, culture, and media (Masten, 2015).

The great surprise of resilience research is the ordinariness of the phenomena. Resilience appears to be a common phenomenon that results in most cases from the

operation of basic human adaptational systems (Masten, 2001). The survival of an organization during crisis is dependent on the resilience of its members as well as its leadership (Teo, Lee, & Lim, 2017). Teo et al. (2017) suggest that one of the primordial tasks of leaders in a crisis is to recognize the early signs, invoke that a threshold has been crossed, and usher the organization into a new phase of the organizational lifecycle where new routines and structural patterns can be learned. Previous studies highlighted that resilient employees are better prepared to overcome difficulties and stressful events and are able to find a positive meaning in negative circumstance, becoming more adaptive and successful over time (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

**Posttraumatic growth.** Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) define posttraumatic growth as the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises and identified five major domains, including greater appreciation of life and changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships with others; a greater sense of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities or paths for one's life; and spiritual development.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) provide a framework for understanding the process of posttraumatic growth with an emphasis on the role of cognitive processing. Cognitive rebuilding takes into account the changed reality of one's life after trauma produces schemas that incorporate the trauma and possible events in the future, and that are more resistant to being shattered. These results are experienced as growth. Growth, however, does not occur as a direct result of trauma. It is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs. It is also suggested that posttraumatic growth mutually



interacts with life wisdom and the development of the life narrative, and that it is an ongoing process, not a static outcome (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004).

Aldwin and Levenson (2004) argue that Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) posttraumatic growth measures assess only positive outcomes, which does not permit contrast with negative outcomes; stressors and positive events may promote development in adulthood that is not restricted to traumatic events. Many researchers agree that the evidence seems to support the contention that it is not so much the event but how individuals cope with it that determines positive versus negative outcomes. Further, emotion regulation is an important component, as is cognitive processing (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2004). However, similar to the argument from Aldwin and Levenson (2004) that suggests Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) do not devote adequate attention to coping strategies as mediators of the relation of stress and development outcomes, Janoff-Bulman (2004) provides a more detailed explanation of how coping processes helps account for posttraumatic growth.

Successful coping or recovery from trauma does not mean returning to one's earlier fundamental assumptions, but rather establishing a comfortable, integrated assumptive world that incorporates the traumatic experience. The trauma is permanently encoded in the survivor's psyche via changes in these basic schemas that reflect some degree of both disillusionment and personal vulnerability; that is, at the level of their fundamental assumptions, survivors are left with somewhat more negative views of the world and their own security (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). As a result, Janoff-Bulman (2004) offers three distinct models of posttraumatic growth: strength through suffering,

psychological preparedness, and existential reevaluation that account for the positive and negative being inextricably linked. The survivor can focus on one or the other.

Posttraumatic growth manifests in different ways. A study on posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth among primary breast cancer patients reported enhanced appreciation of life and interpersonal relationships were most salient, whereas new opportunities were least frequently identified (Cordova, Giese-Davis, Golant, Kronenwetter, Change, & Spiegel, 2007). Posttraumatic growth is not simply a function of socially desirable reporting in which patients uniformly and globally rate themselves as having changed for the better. Rather, patients appear to have a differentially greater awareness of the value of life and relationships (Cordova et al., 2007).

Tedeschi (2011) leverages Janoff-Bulman's (2004) models to facilitate PTG (posttraumatic growth) as an intervention through understanding trauma response as a precursor to growth, enhancing emotional regulation, constructive self-disclosure, creating a trauma narrative with PTG domains, and developing life principles that are robust to challenges (Tedeschi, 2011). Combat veterans and their families face significant challenges not only to their ability to cope, but often to their fundamental belief systems (Tedeschi, 2011). Transforming the doubt, guilt, and pain of posttrauma living into a clear sense of direction involves arriving at a set of principles that serve to guide decisions and actions to meet future challenges, thus promoting resilience (Tedeschi, 2011).

Znoj (2005) studied bereavement and posttraumatic growth with similar findings for the important variables for PTG including the importance of emotional regulation, acceptance, and taking a positive stance. As life with its daily chores and activities goes

on, people might get used to their emotional states and could learn tolerating emotionally ambiguous situations better than without the experience of loss (Znoj, 2005).

As Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) suggest, it was not until the 1980s, and then more strongly in the 1990s, that systematic scholarly interest specifically focused on the possibility of growth from the struggle with trauma emerged. Investigations in this area can inform us about psychological phenomena about which we know very little, and as they do so, they can provide significant information for those who attempt to provide assistance to those coping with major life disruptions (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Even as we examine those aspects that are amenable to the methodologies now at hand, some analysts must be willing to look at leadership in all its complexity, which may mean looking at elements that cannot be nailed down in the laboratory (Bennis, 2007).

Posttraumatic growth is both a process and an outcome. As research states there are additional elements to be considered, I intend to explore the experiences of leaders who not only bounce back from adversity which could include trauma, but use it as a springboard to further individual development or growth, and the development of more humane social behaviors and social organizations (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

The need for leadership development has never been more urgent; the implementation of ongoing development and training may have not only positive professional but personal outcomes. “Lifelong learning” has been a buzzword in corporate and university circles for decades, but it is still far from a reality. Companies of all sorts realize that to survive in today’s volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment, they need leadership skills and organizational capabilities different from

those that helped them succeed in the past. There is also a growing recognition that leadership development should not be restricted to the few who are in or close to the C-suite (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019).

Organizations may also implement strategies to promote the development of problem-solving behaviors in the work setting, such as developing training sessions on ways to cope with adversity or uncertainty through focus groups or implementing suggestion schemes. When problem-solving behaviors are part of everyday organizational life, employees are better prepared to respond to setbacks and crises when they happen (Dimas, Rebelo, Lourenco, & Pessoa, 2018). Research on naturally occurring resilience suggested that there were windows of opportunity for intervention, when developmental processes, contexts, and opportunities converged to support positive change and a high return on investment. One example is the transition to adulthood, a transition when brain development, motivation, mentoring, training, and other opportunities appear to support positive redirection of the life course (Masten, 2015).

This study aims to investigate the way leaders have experienced personal adversity, have grown from it, and how they may have leveraged those experiences to flourish in their careers and lead others. The intent is to take these learnings and add to the conversation of how we portray leaders beyond the media's superficial routines by providing diverse examples for future leaders to identify with. In addition, this study intends to add to the existing literature on leadership and training programs that aid in the development of high-level leaders so others may benefit from those learnings.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to understand personal experiences with adversity among high-level leaders and how they may have drawn on those experiences to support their careers and leadership.

### **Sample**

Participants were identified via the Principal Investigator's professional and personal network. Request for participation was made via email with consideration of the criteria: high-level executives, including C-suite, Partner, Founder, or President. 12 interviews were conducted in total including seven men and five women. Ages ranged from 35-55 and experience as a high-level executive fluctuated between 10-20 years. The industries varied among leaders interviewed, including legal, venture capital, consulting, ecommerce, entertainment, and retail.

### **Research Relationship**

Although I have a personal relationship with some of the participants, I entered the relationship as a researcher with a career built on supporting C-suite executives. Participants were asked to consider the questions as an opportunity to have a conversation for a more friendly and trusting tone rather than researcher/participant, which may be viewed as more intimidating.

To ensure the privacy of participants, the following safeguards were employed to protect their rights:

- Each participant was provided an Informed Consent form via email with request to participate (Appendix A). The research objectives were articulated verbally, and consent was attained prior to interview.

- The participants were informed of all data collection devices and activities.
- Participants were assured that they would remain anonymous; there were no reference to names or organizations.
- Participants were provided access to verbatim transcriptions and written interpretations/reports if interested.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through face-to-face or one-on-one video conference interviews lasting no more than 60 minutes using a multi-question script with a narrative approach (Appendix B). Each interview was recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Questions asked were thought provoking to better understand the role personal adversity may have had in supporting the participant's careers and leadership.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative interviewing design. Qualitative methods allow a depth of inquiry to occur during the course of the study (Creswell, 2013). A drawback of qualitative research approaches is the researcher bias that can affect the collection and analysis of results. For example, it is important for researchers to understand that what questions they ask participants and how they ask those questions can lead the participant. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the question wording and phrasing as well as participants' responses. In addition, the participants were sourced from the researcher's network which may introduce additional bias and varying levels of comfortability among participants.

Interviewing poses strengths and limitations. Its benefits are that intangible data such as nonverbal language can be captured, and feelings and thoughts can be probed in

depth. Additionally, interviews can capture process info that surveys cannot. The primary challenge of research interviews is that they often produce a tremendous volume of information that can be difficult to analyze, absorb, and interpret (Creswell, 2013).

The qualitative interviewing approach was considered appropriate for this study due to the lack of in-depth literature about leadership styles and executive coaching among leaders in the entertainment industry. Qualitative research has been identified as an appropriate method in such cases (Creswell, 2013). Also, the interview method would allow me to gain a depth of insight about leaders' perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations of the topics being examined. This kind of information would be difficult to gain through other methods such as survey, observation, or archival research.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used a categorical coding matrix, data was organized categorically and chronologically, reviewed repeatedly, and continually coded. A list of major themes that surfaced were chronicled. A password protected transcription software program was leveraged to transcribe voice recorded interview sessions. Taped interviews were transcribed verbatim, written transcripts were retrieved, isolated, grouped and regrouped for analysis. The sample size of 12 participants is small and therefore a limitation and made it difficult to generalize. The next chapter provides a deep dive into the results.

## Chapter 4: Results

This chapter reports the analysis and coding of the data from 12 individual transcripts. Having explained adversity for the purpose of this study as negative experiences that have the possibility to disturb a person's adaptive functioning or development (Yates, Masten, 2004), adversity is something we all experience whether personally, professionally, or both.

Adversity comes in many forms, such as chronic, acute, systems within the individual, and the most common across participants at multiple level and settings simultaneously. As seen in Table 1, adversity can be experienced through major life disruptions, instability at home, parenthood, or manifest through more institutionalized experiences, such as school, work, or sports. Adversity has also been described as a teacher. For example, a CEO stated,

I have had the privilege of having a number of what I will call adverse circumstances. I think adversity is my absolute best teacher of all. I do not have to take notes about what I learned through adversity. It is burned into me like having a bad boss. I know what not to be because of him. Having a failed partnership, I know what not to do because of that failed partnership and it changed habit patterns. It changed brain patterns. And again, I did not have to work on it. I do not say it happened automatically because that's not how human change happens, but adversity has been my most, what is the right word, my most memorable teacher.

Adversity may also be a growth opportunity, as stated by another C-suite executive, "For me, adversity, I look at it as almost a growth opportunity. Like anytime there is a



challenge or struggle, specifically at work, whether it is with individuals [or] projects, I am kind of the first to the forefront to try and tackle it and to figure it out because I think that is how you learn.” And finally, adversity may be seen as a catalyst as one Founder describes, “... adversity will push you into certain things and push you out of some things like getting laid off led me to move which... took my career in a whole other direction.” For this sample, the most common type of adversity was multiple level and settings challenges simultaneously (e.g., broader systems of family, school, employment, etc.). 75% of the sample provided examples compared to only 25% of the sample identifying chronic type adversity (e.g., discrimination).

**Table 1**

*Adversity*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Exemplar Quote(s)</b>	<b>Participant Experience(s)</b>
Chronic (e.g., poverty, discrimination)	“I am a Lesbian. I had to fight through the moments of it not being ‘cool,’ by being who I was and not being in the shadows of not being out. I have a wife and two kids and not caring what other people thought made me more successful.”	3 (25%)
	“Growing up... dirt poor made me want to do jobs that made me money and as I grew in those jobs and got the, what do you call it, the nest, I got the feeling of protection. I was able to move into positions that allow me to do work that was more creative, autonomous, and dynamic through my advocacy organization; projects that help people in a very real endeavor.”	
	“I came from a blue-collar family as I think you can tell from my lack of polish. My Dad cleaned offices. Money was tight. I was in sixth grade and we would go help him with work right after school for like two hours. I would empty trash cans, clean the bathrooms and stuff like that. So, working in a white-collar office, man, it was like eye opening. It's like they've got free coffee! Maybe I was 11 when I realized there's something to aim for, it was like, that's what I want to do I want to work in an office.”	
Acute (e.g., sudden loss of a loved one, addiction)	“I got sober when I was twenty-seven. For about ten years I was in and out of jail; I was an alcoholic and a drug addict. To get sober you have to be tired. For me it was either I get sober or I die.”	2 (16%)
	“My daughter's death was like the ultimate failure for me. I failed at something that I cared more about than I cared about life. In my mind, in the early days, I felt like I had failed as a mother. How, how can I lose a daughter? You know, no good mother loses a daughter. I don't hold that to	

	be true anymore. That failure made it possible for me to be more human.”	
Systems within the Individual (e.g., a virus that attacks the immune system)		0
Multiple Level and Settings Simultaneously (e.g., broader systems of family, school, employment, etc.)	“My parents didn’t provide a stable environment through their separation and divorce; each parent got a child. They moved back and forth constantly. I moved twenty-one times by the age of seventeen. Every other weekend was on a plane and holidays at the airport.”	9 (75%)
	“We moved around a lot. And so, I was constantly in this instability and not in a bad way, it wasn’t scary or anything, my dad was in a position where he had to go and take over portfolios in different cities and whatnot. So, I was always having to make new friends and I got to learn to adapt to different environments and understand people and how they think, how they act like, you know, from a psychological standpoint too.”	
	“Youth sports. Being put on stage in front of everyone. And feeling pressure for not just yourself, but others, like responsibility at a young age, and having others sort of witness it, there's no hiding if you failed. And so, I think that is the initial younger phase that then brought a more fearless person into the workplace.”	
	“The school systems are designed to put you in a box. If you don't fit into the box and it doesn't work, then it's a struggle. Very early on I realized I'm on a different path. I didn't know exactly what that was, but I started to ask myself, what's open to me? The work wasn't challenging; it wasn't interesting to me. My mother and grandmother raised me together. They spent a lot of time telling me I was very smart; probably too much. It was difficult because your parents are dealing with the school system. School is not pleased with me, but I was in AP college level math classes while in seventh grade but failing every other class. It was by choice; it wasn't that I didn't understand	

<p>English or History, it was just that I was completely uninterested. Adversity in a lot of ways feels like different problems.”</p>	
<p>“I was building a company and the partnership that I was creating failed. I would say it was more disruptive and upsetting than my divorce.”</p>	
<p>“I was born in Lithuania; my parents came to the states when I was really young. I was generally raised by American media because my parents were always working. Therefore, what I learned about the world and social norms, how I wanted to behave and act, came from watching American television because that was what I spent most my time doing because no one else had time to really spend time with me. So, I fell in love with the world of make believe.”</p>	
<p>“Leaving a secure job for a startup for pay that was roughly half of what I was making. My dad was like, dude, with the money you’re making now, living at home, you could buy a house in a couple years, you can save money. But I had just gone through the end of a relationship, so it was kind of like a way to escape. At the end of the day, I kind of tapped into like passion and just said, hey, if I follow passion, then other things will kind of come in place, hopefully.”</p>	
<p>“Motherhood. I just don't give a s*** anymore. And because of that, I'm much more willing to take risks that I don't think I would have taken when I was younger.”</p>	

This section focuses on career trajectory specifically individual career evolution and how experiences with adversity played a role in that evolution. Two key themes emerged in the interview transcripts and can be found in Table 2. First, half of the leaders in the sample described a hunger for learning and a key factor for leaving a job is when it is stifled. The second theme was the desire to and sense that they were making an impact in their current role.

**Table 2**

*Career Trajectory: Evolution*

<b>Theme(s)</b>	<b>Exemplar Quote(s)</b>	<b>Participant Experience(s)</b>
Learning	“What drives me is learning “... if there's points in a role where you feel stuck and learning is stifled then those were the moments where I would look up and find that next thing.”	6 (50%)
	“I have left jobs because my learning has actually started to plateau. So that's my goal is to make sure that I'm working on what is relevant, not just now, but what's going to be relevant, at least five years from now.”	
	“If I find myself in a situation where I'm not learning a lot on a regular basis then it's time to go. I really need that. I strive to be filling my brain constantly. I believe you can learn even in bad situations. My challenge and impetus for moving on is not just improving on the things I already know but being exposed to a full spectrum so there's times where my creative side drives and my technology takes a backseat or vice versa.”	
Impact	“Am I walking in and not excited about the impact I can make? What fuels me probably more than anything is being useful, being impactful. If I don't know what use I am, if I don't see my impact, what's in it for me and what's in it for the business? When I don't feel like I'm adding value anymore it begins to eat away at me, boredom, if it feels like it's deja vu - it's time to go.”	4 (33%)
	“I honestly never would have thought I'd be in the position I am today. I knew I wanted to make an impact and a change whether it was industry or nonprofits.”	

While two main themes dominated the responses, a few outliers were noticed as well. For example, a Founder stated,

I think I have just never been satisfied. I am sort of a perpetually dissatisfied soul and I am never content with the way things are, I always

kind of believe that they could be better. I think that there are many different trains that I could have gotten on along the way in my career and just said, this is good enough. And I never did because I always kept like shooting higher and wanting more.

Another CEO when asked about their career evolution and reason why they would leave a job said, “Ultimately, if I felt like my gifts and talents and abilities were not seen or engaged.” This CEO’s catalyst for departure was the lack of recognition and management’s inability to tap into their strengths and further develop this individual’s abilities.

The second focus of the career trajectory section is the ability to reach this level of career. The question, “Can you tell me a time when you leveraged a past experience with adversity to navigate the feeling of failure at work?” nearly always prompted a physical reaction whether a laugh or contorted face. However, the ability to use past adversity to address a current failure was not considered a key factor in the ability of these executives to reach their high positions. What is worthy to note is the commonalities across participants in their view of failure and the ability to rise above and press on. Failing is a part of a career trajectory. What stands out across participants is the lack of acknowledgement, concern with it, and tendency to not dwell on it. One C-suite executive stated, “... this is where the hubris is actually kind of incredible. I genuinely cannot tell you a time where I think I failed at work. Minus failing to keep myself out of a situation or failing to see the signals and got too comfortable at a job at one point.” While another Founder and CEO offered humor, “Did it ever dawn on you that I do not fail? No, I definitely fail but I guess that is it I do not think I fail. It is only

the next hustle, how do we move forward or how do I make believe that failure was intended? There is no time to wallow.” The outcome was not that failure determined the ability to reach this level of their career instead it was categorized as perseverance, the ability to keep going. Table 3 outlines exemplar quotes for this career trajectory theme.

*Table 3*

*Career Trajectory: Ability to Reach this Level of Career*

<b>Theme(s)</b>	<b>Exemplar Quote(s)</b>	<b>Participant Experience(s)</b>
Positive Thinking	“Can do attitude; taking challenges as opportunities”	5 (42%)
	“Staying positive, I believe being at my low of the low of where I have been has made me who I am today. My adversity has made me see things from a grateful point of view. And I'm happy to be able to work hard and just to be there.”	
	“Accepting where you are and recognizing it can't be worse than my worst time. No matter what I always ended up on my feet. I have been "ok" and believing no matter what you will be "ok" you reflect on well, if I've made it through that, I can make it through this.”	
Vulnerability	“I think people respond well to people who are genuine and sincere and show humility, you know, and go to someone and say, I don't know how to do this, please help.”	3 (25%)
Perseverance	“To me, failure is not making the calls. It's not trying.”	7 (58%)
	“To us failing isn't an option. What's the saying "fail fast" I don't believe in that whatsoever. I think there are times you're going to fail but failures are successes at the end of the day because you take away so many learnings and a lot of times those projects turn into something new that is going to be, you know, a successful product.”	

	<p>“I can't remember specific failures. But I know that in my career “...there's been plenty of them. I think you just like, learn your lesson, ingest it, and move on.”</p>	
Mentor	<p>“I think two really big things for me were the value of having someone who did respect you and wanted to teach you like a good boss, a great influence, he made sure that we learned things, he made sure that you can come to him.”</p> <p>“I have an incredible mentor, somebody, who you know challenges me, has supported me from day one. And when I say support, it is not, you know, pat on the back you're doing a great job. I mean having my back when I do fail or make mistakes and then also going into solution mode instead of like, oh, s*** mode.”</p>	3 (25%)
Role Model	<p>“Good role models. My grandmother was an executive at a company but came from nothing. When her parents brought her home from the hospital, they lived in a train car. She was from this incredibly conservative family. She was afraid of the changes but embraced them. Being able to see people do that while still having a family, living their lives, and doing things that matter, I think that shows you what is possible and that there are other paths available to you rather than just the normal lawyer, doctor, finance linear paths.”</p> <p>“I come from a long line of entrepreneurs. Somehow our family culture was ‘you go out and make it happen.’ I can remember my dad saying you can do anything you want to do, which, for a girl born in the early 60s was actually not true at all.”</p> <p>“I think it's witnessing my parents make the leap of faith, leaving their home country, where they had a comfortable lifestyle, but realizing that there's more available to them if they come to the States for their family long-term.”</p>	5 (42%)

Although five prominent themes emerged, there were a few outliers including leveraging an ability to not care what others think as stated by one C-suite interviewee,



“To think I do not care allowed me to believe it. It worked better for me because I had watched so many executives be destroyed by the need to be liked and loved and affirmed and revered and I did not care about that or at least I did not think I did. It let take ownership of my career and not rely on or put my career in anyone else's hands because 'I do not care,' while maybe not healthy in my personal life, served me professionally because I did not let anyone else dictate my career. It only mattered what I cared about it.

Similar, but through a different lens, another C-suite executive reflected on their ability to not care what others think,

“Motherhood. I just do not give a s\*\*\* anymore. And because of that, I am much more willing to take risks that I do not think I would have taken when I was younger. So, I think there was a time in my life where those three things happened. Motherhood, just age, and hitting a point in my career where I just owned who I was a bit more and controlled my destiny a bit more.

Another Founder reflected specifically on leveraging their adversity,

Because I just have a working knowledge of a whole host of society and culture that many people do not have, I am able to utilize that and to figure out how to make that a positive. I have learned how to manipulate. As an example, I will give a speech and I know when to let my accent come out. I know when to make a self-deprecating comment. I know when to

reference, lets say, my tattoos for effect. And, so, it just gives me a bigger tool belt, which when wielded correctly, can be quite beneficial.

Table 4 focuses on the perception of leadership and how experiences with adversity have shaped their individual ways of leading. Two major themes emerged from the data. The first common theme and key factor in the view of leadership was the sense of responsibility. One C-suite executive reflected, “I once had 15 people reporting to me and that realization of the control you have over their lives and the daily effort that takes comes with a moment of what does this person see you as?” For another it was a moment of recognition that brought on the sense of responsibility,

I was given an award for one of the most influential leaders. Okay, I thought, so this is a group of people who I am not directly involved with, who are coming from outside and calling you a leader. Which means I am being seen by other people, which means the work I am doing is reaching other people. This may be because of my own issues, but I constantly need to be reminded I am a leader. And with that, I have responsibility.

And for another a moment of accomplishment, “After I made Partner for the first time, I perceived myself as a leader. I used to be the kid trying to get five or ten minutes of someone’s time for advice. I now give the time wherever I can.”

**Table 4**  
**Leadership**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Exemplar Quote(s)</b>	<b>Participant Experience(s)</b>
Responsibility	<p>“Leadership to me is helping other people see their own potential but doing it in a way that I am absolutely relentless in holding them to it. That's how I lead. People listen to me and now I need to be responsible in where I take them.”</p>	7 (58%)
	<p>“Fatherhood is when I perceived myself as a leader. I always talk about when you think about your children, we want to lead by example. And it's funny because you use the word lead. It's the same with work I wouldn't ask someone to do something that I wouldn't do myself.”</p>	
Empathy	<p>“I don't judge people. I have a kinder heart. I realized you have to take the good from each person and learn from the bad in each of them. I took people for who there were.”</p>	5 (42%)
	<p>“I try and really understand each person as an individual and not treat them like a group I oversee because everyone's incentivized and acts differently.”</p>	
	<p>“I think that's the probably the most difficult part of leading, you have people dealing with change and struggling with those changes. And people don't like change and they want to come in and they want to know what's expected, and they want to know they can do their work. That has definitely shifted the way we approach our people. We're very conscious about taking our time when something goes wrong. We're very careful about approaching things in a very genuine way and making people realize that we're in it to make sure they have a good experience here.”</p>	

The second major theme, but almost equal in frequency with the first theme, was empathy. Empathy, for the majority, emerged as an outcome with direct correlation to the individual's experience with personal adversity. As one CEO states,

I have lived through the unimaginable, the suicide of a child, and I have lived to find joy, to live fully again. I am not a leader that has it all together and I do not pretend to, I do not need to. I am adamant that people take good care of their families. As a leader I have created a lot of room for care and nurture, not just for children but their aging parents, etc.

For another C-suite interviewee, it was their experience with another empathetic leader that instilled empathy as a core part of their leadership as shown by exemplar quote,

On September 11th, I was in my office, and the CEO at the time was walking by and he did not know who I was at that point in my career, but my name was somewhere visible. And he walked in and thanked me for being at work that day. And for me that was the moment where I was like, okay, it is not just about how do we drive decisions but how to do it with empathy?

Although there were two overarching themes, there were also outliers. One Founder reflected on how experiences with personal adversity still impacts them today, the ability to recognize it, and leverage those around them for support, "I still have that confrontational streak in me. And so, I kind of do the opposite of that. I send my employees if I am triggered or check-in with them on a response I have crafted. My leadership, my leadership style, empowering employees and checking myself with them."

Similarly, another C-suite reflects on their personal adversity and leverages their learnings from it,

I am not afraid to be vulnerable in front of my team which I have heard they really appreciate. I am honest and level set with them. I am not afraid to tell them things are bad. So therefore, they feel like they can trust me and are in the know. And I think that comes from my parents. When we were growing up and, you know, wanting to make ends meet my parents were always really real with me about the financial situation, the challenges, or if someone was unhealthy in the family, and they needed to deal with that.

From another viewpoint, a Partner discussed the difficulty of having a direct report leave because of their leadership style and that lesson learned, “He was a pretty experienced guy. And I did not give him enough room to run. I kind of boxed him in, and so I have since then tried to hire good people and let them operate their way and provide some guardrails, but not be rigid.”

This last section shows the participants’ ability to grow from adversity and the process they leverage to make it meaningful to them. Table 5 provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the individual actions that participants take for sense-making. There were three main themes with reflection being most prominent. One Partner discussed their own journey through reflection, “You got to learn from the past, but you got to let it go. If you always replay the past, you will always be fixing. A defining moment for me was when I was no longer living in the past.”

*Table 5*

*Adversity: The Process and Ability to Grow from It*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Participant Experience(s)</b>
Therapy	Counseling session with a professional	3 (25%)
Reflection	Defined as serious thought or consideration	6 (50%)
	In writing (journaling, pro-con list, benchmarking)	3 (25%)
	Self-talk	2 (17%)
Reading		3 (25%)

Two outliers emerged with one Founder fondly connecting music as an outlet and reflective tool for processing and making adversity meaningful, while another Founder, relied heavily on their support system, “My wife, my sister, I am not the kind of person who can process things in my head, I need to talk to other people about it. I need to make sense about what I'm thinking about it through talking to someone else.”

**Summary**

Each of the 12 participants had an experience with personal adversity in one form or another and many experienced more than one type. Nine participants identified a multiple level and settings simultaneously adverse experience while three participants identified a chronic version. Six participants (50%) noted that they had left a current employer or career if they felt their learning was stifled. Four themes emerged as the ability to reach this level of career: seven participants associated perseverance, five participants associated positive thinking, and eight participants recognized an external influence whether mentor or role model. Two key themes were linked to leadership, the

perception of and way of leading, seven participants associated a sense of responsibility with leadership and five participants identified empathy as a direct result of their experiences with personal adversity. Finally, reflection including serious thought, writing, or self-talk was the process most relied upon to make experiences with adversity meaningful to the participants.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative study utilized data from 12 interviews with high-level executives to add to the literature on leader and leadership development. Specifically, the interview data provided insights into the impact personal adversity had on the career trajectory and leadership styles of high-level executives, including their career evolution, perception of leadership, and how those experiences impacted their way of leading. Participants had various experiences with personal adversity and provided a deeper understanding of the types and severity levels of those experiences.

Career trajectory, the evolution and ability to reach this level in their careers, provided insights into the desire for continued learning and making an impact. Those two factors determined whether a leader would stay in their current role or seek out an opportunity that met that criteria. A combination of attributes and external forces were considered by leaders with regard to their ability to reach this level in their career. Positive thinking, vulnerability, perseverance, mentors and role models were identified as key factors in their trajectory. The impact of personal adversity on leadership resulted in responsibility and empathy as key themes drawn on from their experiences. Frequently referenced in the data was external acknowledgement of their leadership status that contributed to their perception of leadership, a strong moral code of treating others as you would like to be treated, and the desire to pay it forward. Finally, there is a process that emerged from the data to make sense of and grow from personal adversity identified through coping mechanisms and outlets with reflection being most prominent followed by therapy and reading.

The positive scholarship lens prompts researchers to expand focus from



describing what is problematic to capturing mechanisms that enable human flourishing. Positive scholarship represents a quest or desire to understand the processes that produce certain collective and individual states that are less commonly addressed by current organizational studies (Roberts, 2006).

### **Implications for Scholarship**

Many participants referenced a childhood adverse event that had either influenced their way of leading or ability to reach this level in their career. The findings from this study provide support for the findings from the previous study conducted by Mittal et al. (2015). For example, if a person grows up in an unpredictable and constantly changing environment, he or she ought to develop cognitive tendencies that help him or her function adaptively in this type of challenging environment. In addition, Powell and Baker (2014) found that understanding the answer to the “why” question helps to explain much of the variation in *how* firms respond. The key step is less a matter of explicit decision making and more a matter of “bracketing,” where some features of the adversity become pertinent and others are downplayed or ignored in creating the definition of the situation.

Little prior theory is available to help us to see or understand the application of adversity. This study raises questions around whether the level of severity and type of adversity determine specific outcomes, better understanding the application of adversity from childhood through adulthood may contribute to early therapy or training techniques that inform career advisors or enable human flourishing. To *flourish* means to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience (Fredrickson & Loasada, 2005).

The findings of this study have important implications for current and future leaders, whether recent graduates entering the workforce or those looking to change or advance their career. This study achieves this by adding to the conversation of how we portray leaders and what makes up a leader profile; it is not one size fits all. Participants leveraged learnings from experiences with personal adversity and applied them professionally. Empathy and responsibility were noted as key factors that shaped their individual view of leadership and way of leading. Leaders need to manage emotions such that followers are aware of problems yet, given the collective vision, are confident about resolving problems and feel optimistic about the efficacy of their personal contribution. Not only do leaders have to meet these multiple demands, but they also have to constructively resolve conflicts, and generate and maintain a sense of cooperation and trust (George, 2000).

The leadership literature has typically focused on trauma inside the workplace and the behaviors and tools associated to overcome those hardships, such as abusive supervision and harassment. The corrupt executives at institutions such as Enron, Worldcom, and Tyco were not mere symbols of corporate greed and malfeasance. Bad leadership at Enron alone impoverished thousands of employees, stealing their livelihoods, gutting their retirement accounts, and tearing them apart with stress (Bennis, 2007). This study addressed a gap in the literature as it relates to the application of experiences with personal adversity that were had prior to or in tandem with the hardships at work.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study investigated the career trajectory of leaders, specifically development

and the ability to reach this level in their career. The desire for learning and impact are interesting data points for those seeking career opportunities and organizations that are looking to retain and cultivate top talent. Candidates applying for roles can interview for the appetite to provide learning and impact within an organization or role. It can also be systemically built into an organization's culture through flexible job descriptions, cross-functional skill building, project work opportunities, and implemented by leadership and management.

While conducting interviews, some participants asked how to identify profiles similar to themselves, self-motivated, capable, dedicated, and eager to advance. Similar to resilience training, the themes of positive thinking, vulnerability, and perseverance, traits identified by the leaders with regard to their ability to reach this level in their career, are teachable. Shin et al. (2012) argued that positive affect is a crucial mediator of the effects of psychological resilience upon employees' commitment to change. This relationship results from resilient individuals' understanding of the value of positive emotions and their skills in evoking them (e.g., using their sense of humor and developing effective relaxation techniques), as well as from their possession of coping resources to keep negative emotions under control. These findings are supported by participant's offering humor and an inability to "see" failure and with the data showing defaulting to reflection through writing, self-talk or reading, and therapy as healthy coping techniques. These attributes can also be interviewed for with focused questions around experiences with failure and characteristics leveraged to solve problems and cope with challenges.

In addition, positive thinking, vulnerability, and perseverance can be more prominent in our education system and reinforced by our educators and coaches. Mentorship and role models were external themes identified for the ability to reach this level of career. There is significant research on the positive influence of mentors and role models from forming an occupational identity as a young adult to reassessment of midcareer/midlife, as demonstrated by Kram's (1983) research the mentor relationship has great potential to facilitate career advancement and significantly enhance psychological development both in early and middle adulthood. Given the impact of these findings in support of leaders continued development additional research around mentorship requirements, criteria, and accessibility may be valuable. For example, the last year of high school is a formative time and the readiness for the next step is in question, this may be an impactful time for additional support.

Prescod and Zeligman (2018) found mental health and career counseling, two disciplines that are often discussed as separate entities, can be beneficially integrated. Consistent with Prescod and Zeligman (2018), there may be opportunities for future studies to be done with regard to mental health and the level to which individuals know themselves, make sense of experiences, and then identify careers to pursue. Mental health also has a role in one's ability to not only cope with but thrive from adverse experiences. Leaders deferred to reflection, therapy, and reading as their process. Effective counselors will infuse work on coping skills into their career counseling to ensure clients have healthy coping skills for moving forward in all areas of their lives, including vocational areas (Grant, 2014).

## **Limitations**

Interviewing poses strengths and limitations. Interviewing provides indirect information filtered through the views of interviewees (Creswell, 2014). Limitations include small sample size, overwhelming amount of data that can be difficult to analyze and absorb making generalizations difficult, and varying levels of articulation. The researcher's presence may bias responses (Creswell, 2014). There is potential for researcher bias as participant's were recruited from the researcher's personal network.

## **Conclusion**

The data provided a bird's eye view of leaders emerging from different experiences with personal adversity. The level of severity and type of adversity fluctuated however the data remained mostly consistent across the varying levels. The ability to acknowledge, reflect, make sense of, and grow from their personal adversity is what is unique in each of these leaders. The lack of concern for failure and in some instances an ability to disregard other opinions when it did not serve them is a testament to the value of leveraging learnings from personal adversity and its application professionally.

I believe as a society we can do better by introducing healthy coping mechanisms and processes for making sense of our experiences at much earlier stages in education, including as early as preschool. This study provided a deeper understanding of the impact personal adversity had on the career trajectory and leadership among high-level executives. The data was developed using a narrative approach to interviews with high-level executives. Finally, important implications from these interviews were discussed with reference to leadership in regard to personal adversity, profile, and career trajectory as a subject of both research and personal development.

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## Appendix A: Informed Consent

### PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

#### *Graziadio School of Business and Management*

#### INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

#### **Leadership and Career Trajectory: The Role of Personal Adversity**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Kristina Kovacs, MSOD graduate student under the supervision of faculty advisor, Darren Good, Ph.D. at Pepperdine University, because you are a C-suite, President, Partner or Founder. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. You will also be given a copy of this form for your records.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to understand the role personal adversity may have in supporting the careers and leadership among high-level executives. The objective is to better understand the characteristics, factors, and / or behaviors associated with personal adversity that contributed to leaders' perceived career growth and leadership style.

#### **STUDY PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 45-minute in-depth audio recorded interview either face-to-face or via skype depending on your availability. You will be instructed not to identify your name or industry during anytime of the recorded interview. The recordings will be encrypted, housed on the principal investigator's G-suite drive so no one except the principal investigator can access the information. The interviews will be voice-recorded and transcribed. Any transcribed or handwritten notes will be analyzed and coded based on emerging themes and patterns.

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

The potential and foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study are minimal. Identity will remain anonymous and you will be subject to the same emotional reactions you may have during typical conversation while discussing an incident with adversity. To mitigate any psychological discomfort, you will be allowed to pause and

resume at your will. The principal investigator will focus on how the incident affects you today rather than reliving any prior experiences with adversity.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are several anticipated benefits to society which include adding to existing literature on leadership, resilience, and positive organizational scholarship. Additionally, there are opportunities to create programming, training and/ or coaching for current and future leaders by identifying and understanding the characteristics, factors, and / or behaviors associated with personal adversity that contributed to leaders' perceived career growth and leadership.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records collected for this study will be anonymous far as permitted by law. However, if required to do so by law, it may be necessary to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if disclosed any instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

There will be no identifiable information obtained in connection with this study. Your name, address, or other identifiable information will not be collected. The interviews will be voice-recorded. The data collected will be encrypted, housed on the principal investigator's G-suite drive so no one except the principal investigator can access the information. Any transcribed or handwritten notes will be kept in a locked file case in the principal investigator's residence. The data will be stored on a password protected computer at the researcher's place of residence for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

### **SUSPECTED NEGLECT OR ABUSE OF CHILDREN**

Under California law, the researcher(s) who may also be a mandated reporter will not maintain as confidential, information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information, he or she is required to report this abuse to the proper authorities.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any

time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

### **ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION**

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating.

### **INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION**

You understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries you may have concerning the research herein described. You understand that you may contact Kristina Kovacs at [Kristina.Kovacs@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Kristina.Kovacs@pepperdine.edu) or Darren Good, Ph.D. at [Darren.Good@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Darren.Good@pepperdine.edu) if you have any other questions or concerns about this research.

### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu).

## Appendix B: Interview Script

**Purpose of the study:** The role personal adversity may have in supporting the careers and leadership among high-level executives.

### **Main Research Questions:**

1. How have experiences with adversity affected your career trajectory?
2. How have experiences with adversity affected you as a leader?
3. To what do you attribute your ability to grow from adversity?

### **Follow-up Interview Questions:**

#### **Addressing Main Research Question 1:**

1. Can you tell me about an experience with adversity that influenced your thoughts on what you wanted to do when you grew up?
2. How has your career evolved over time?
  - 2a. Did experiences with adversity play a role in that evolution?
3. To what do you attribute your ability to reach this level in your career?
  - 3a. Was it an experience? A person?
4. Can you tell me a time when you leveraged a past experience with adversity to navigate the feeling of failure at work?

#### **Addressing Main Research Question 2:**

1. Can you pinpoint the moment when you experienced the perception of yourself as a leader?
  - 1a. What was happening? How were others responding to you? What behaviors were on display? How did you feel?
2. Can you give a specific example of how experiences with adversity impact your leadership behavior today?
3. How have experiences with adversity impacted your business practices?
  - 3a. Setting the mission/vision/values, storytelling, or strategy

#### **Addressing Main Research Question 3:**

1. To what do you attribute your ability to grow from adversity?
  - 1a. What was your process? E.g: Did you seek help? If so, what kind? For how long? If not, what did you turn to?
2. What did you do in your process to make adversity meaningful to you?
  - 2a. Do you leverage this process today? If so, when? Under what circumstances? Can you give me an example?