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# **ADVERSITY AND LEADER DEVELOPMENT: MINDFULNESS AS A POTENTIAL MODERATOR**

by

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**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for graduation with**

## **University Honors**

with a major in  
Economic & International Business

in the Economics and Finance/MSLE

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## **Abstract:**

Why do some leaders respond to adversity by becoming more empathetic, impactful, and resilient — while others do not? Since the Covid-19 pandemic, suffering has gained personal relevance to each one of us. Although many researchers have explored why some individuals – when faced with trauma – grow as a result, little work has been done to understand this process specifically within the context of leaders and leader development. As such, the primary purpose of this paper is to explore what allows some leaders to respond to adversity/trauma with leadership development. Based on the mediators of productive framing, cognitive engagement, positive affective appraisal of the challenge, and the acceptance of difficult emotions, we would like to suggest mindfulness meditation as a viable possibility for leaders to proactively influence their ability to grow during and after traumatic and adverse circumstances.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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## Introduction:

Throughout history, we see evidence of leader figures who faced incredible levels of adversity. For some of them, it seems that their bouts with trauma and suffering actually contributed to molding them into the leader they became -- consider Abraham Lincoln who faced depression throughout his presidency or Nelson Mandela who spent decades in prison due to racial oppression (Koehn, 2018; Mandela, 2021). Past literature has extensively explored a concept known as post traumatic growth (PTG) which is defined as a phenomenon in which trauma serves as a “catalyst” for growth for some individuals (Henson, Truchot, & Canevello, 2021). In the workplace, developmental job experiences (DJE) have been studied in order to understand why workplace stress sometimes results in employee development (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014). In his work on antifragility, Nassim Taleb described a phenomenon in which some systems require stressors in order to grow stronger – and conversely will become weaker when isolated from challenge (Taleb, 2016). The idea that suffering can lead to personal growth, immortalized by the colloquialism “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” is of interest to academicians, practitioners, and individuals throughout the world.

Each of the aforementioned veins of study have attempted, independently, to understand what determines whether a person is able to respond to adversity in a way that leads to personal growth. However, none of the literature has explicitly modeled how trauma/adversity affects leaders specifically. Given that leaders are not exempt from suffering and adversity, it is of special consideration to understand why some leaders are able to respond to adversity with leadership development, while others struggle to process the difficult emotions associated with traumatic experiences (Henson, Truchot, & Canevello, 2021; Dotlich,

2005). Furthermore, there is a lack of research that addresses how a leader might proactively influence his or her ability to grow through traumatic and/or adverse circumstances. In this paper, we will address both of these issues.

While the topic of 'growing through adversity' has garnered much attention from other disciplines, there is fundamental value in exploring it specifically within the context of leadership. There are three reasons regarding why we feel this is the case. First, while they are similar in nature, leadership development and personal growth have slightly different applications. Second, leaders often act in different roles depending on the context they are engaged in – meaning that personal development does not necessarily guarantee leader development, and vice versa (McAdams, 2013). Finally, leaders and aspiring leaders have been characterized by a specific desire to seek opportunities to improve as a leader; this has been referred to as motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). As such, framing post-traumatic growth literature within the context of leadership will make these theoretical frameworks more attractive to leaders and leaders-to-be.

As mentioned previously, the primary purpose of this paper is to elucidate the process by which trauma has the potential to lead to leader development. A secondary purpose is to explore one practical way that leaders might proactively influence this process in themselves. By drawing from the existing literature, we will attempt to create a model that specifically addresses how the process of 'growing through adversity' is relevant to leaders and their leadership development. Our *Adversity → Leader Development* model will include four mediators which, we assert, influence whether a leader can process adversity in a way that leads to leader development. These four mediators are: cognitive engagement with the



traumatic experience (Henson, Truchot, & Canevello, 2021), productive framing of the stressor (McAdams, 2013), positive affective appraisal of the adverse circumstance (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014), and acceptance of the difficult emotions associated with it (Gloster, 2020; Harris, 2016). In the latter part of the paper, we will suggest mindfulness meditation as one potential method for leaders to proactively influence these four mediators – and, as a consequence, improve their ability to develop leadership traits as a result of the adversity and trauma that they experience (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011; Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d).

### Defining Leader Development:

Leadership has garnered many definitions from the numerous interpretations that have followed it over the years. As such, leadership development is difficult to comprehensively define (Kjellström, Stålné, and Törnblom, 2011). For the sake of clarity and specificity, in this paper we will focus on one particular area of leadership termed transformational leadership. In contrast with transactional leadership, transformational leadership refers to an approach that “moves the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration” (Bass, 1999). In essence, this leadership style is characterized by leading through example, inspiring followers toward a shared vision, and putting the needs of a greater good above one’s own self-interest (Bass, 1999).

Given the fact that transformational leaders may arise at many different levels of an organization, we would like to extend our model to include transformational leaders who are at any given point of their leadership journey – whether or not they presently carry a formal

leadership position. As such, the intent of our model is to elucidate how leaders *and* potential leaders can develop leadership capabilities as a result of the trauma they experience.

For our definition of leader development, we will draw from four basic traits attributed to transformational leadership – intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (Bass, 1999). For our model, we will assume that positive outcomes related to these four leader traits can be characterized as a form of leader development

#### What constitutes trauma?

As we define trauma for the purpose of our model, we are faced with a conundrum – a more specific view of trauma allows for preciseness, but given the nature of this topic, a precise view limits the applicability of our model. In her paper on trauma, Valery Krupnik explores the issue of distinguishing trauma from adversity. She explains that while some definitions of trauma are stringent and categorical, others are more dimensional and inclusive. She cites one perspective which asserts that trauma and adversity are actually just different ends of the same spectrum – essentially, that trauma is actually just really intense adversity (Krupnik, 2019). Krupnik ultimately defines trauma as “a stress response to an event ... outside of the person’s normative life experience, and of a sufficient condition that the response includes a breakdown of self-regulatory functions” (Krupnik, 2019). This view distinguishes trauma from adversity by its long-term impact on the body.

We also recognize that suffering is ultimately subjective – or is based on the perception of the sufferer rather than on the description of event itself. Krupnik seems to agree with this when she states that “trauma may be better defined as the organism’s experience of an event

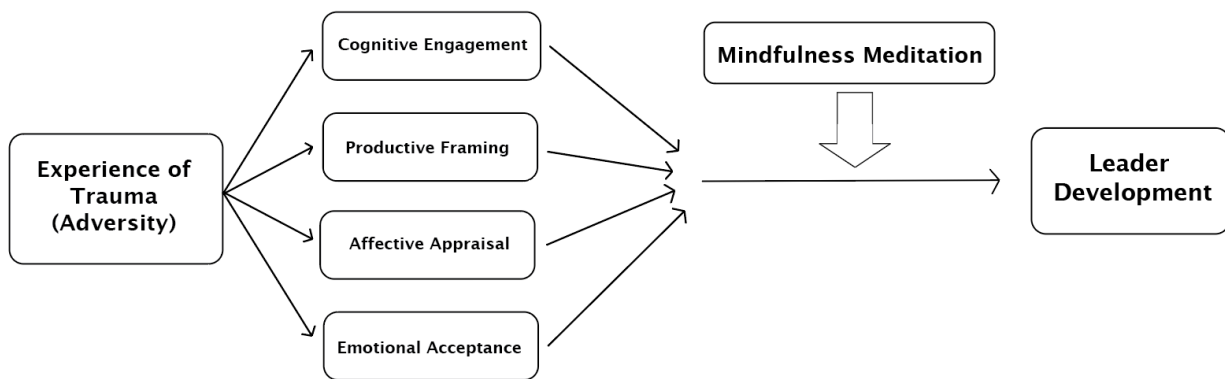
rather than exposure to it” (Krupnik, 2019). Viktor Frankl eloquently describes this process in his classic work *Man’s Search for Meaning* when he compares man’s suffering to the behavior of a gas: “If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus, suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little (Frankl, 2006).

Based on these arguments, we are forced to recognize that trauma and adversity are probably more convoluted than a simplified definition depicts. However, given our model’s need for specificity, we will adopt Krupnik’s definition of trauma as we feel it is the best that is available given the thematic constraints. However, we invite the reader to extrapolate the principles of our model based on their individual circumstances. In light of this purpose, a looser definition of trauma might include traumatic experiences, personal adversity, workplace stressors, and other circumstances that evoke mental or physical suffering (Eisenburger, DeWall, Krupnik, 2019). In summary, while we will adopt a specific definition of trauma in our model, we believe that a subjective case-by-case analysis may be helpful to determine whether the principles set forth within apply to a particular leader’s experience of trauma and/or adversity.

#### Introducing our *Adversity* → *Leader Development* model:

Our model will attempt to describe the relationship between trauma and consequent leader development. As mentioned previously, we will draw on Krupnik’s definition of trauma and set forth in her 2019 paper and will reference transformational leadership to frame our understanding of leader development (Krupnik, 2019; Bass, 1999). As we develop our model,

we will discuss four factors that we believe mediate the relationship between a leader/future leader’s experience of trauma and their consequent leadership development. These four mediators are: productive framing (McAdams, 2013), cognitive engagement (Henson, Truchot, & Canavello, 2021), positive affective appraisal of the potentially traumatic experience (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014), and the acceptance of challenging emotions (Gloster 2020; Harris, 2016), In the following sections, we will explore how each of these factors is related to our model.



- Proposition 1: Leaders who cognitively engage with a traumatic event are more likely to experience leader development post-trauma.
- Proposition 2: If a leader productively frames adversity, they are more likely to experience leader development post-trauma.
- Proposition 3: If a leader’s emotional appraisal of a traumatic event is more positive, they are more likely to experience consequent leader development.
- Proposition 4: If a leader practices emotional acceptance, they are more likely to experience leader development post-trauma.
- Proposition 5: Mindfulness meditation moderates the relationship between each of these factors and leader development post-trauma.

*Model: Adversity → Leader Development*

Cognitive Engagement:

The first mediator in our *Adversity → Leader Development* model that we will consider is *cognitive engagement*. In a systematic review of literature on post-traumatic growth, a group of researchers concluded that one influential factor in determining whether a person was able to process a traumatic experience was whether they were able to engage cognitively with the event itself (Henson, Truchot, & Canavello, 2021). According to them, when someone

intentionally engages with a traumatic event, they are more likely to experience post traumatic growth. As an explanation, they suggest that individuals who ‘cognitively engage’ with an adverse experience are often forced to reconsider goals and re-think old beliefs—which, in turn, can lead to favorable personal outcomes (Henson, Truchot, & Canavello, 2021).

They suggested that deliberate rumination showed evidence of an ongoing process of sensemaking and reconstructing one’s representations of the world over a long period of time – leading to higher levels of growth (Henson, Truchot, & Canavello, 2021). Interestingly, they cited that intrusive rumination was also correlated with PTG. This is surprising given the maladaptive connotation given to ruminative behaviors. They reconcile this by explaining that intrusive rumination -- closely following the traumatic experience – might serve as a ‘catalyst’ for deliberate cognitive engagement with the meaning of the traumatic experience. This is supported by the finding that intrusive rumination about the event was only associated with PTG when it was soon after the event and not recently (Henson, Truchot, & Canavello, 2021). Therefore, cognitive activity around the trauma was most likely to lead to personal growth when it was deliberate and intentional.

Given that cognitive engagement can lead to new ways of thinking for trauma victims, it is plausible that this same behavior would allow leaders to process adversity in a productive way. Based on the models on PTG, we suggest that leaders who cognitively engage with traumatic events might be more likely to reconsider their previous beliefs – leading them to develop updated and more accurate mental models. The ability to re-think and adapt to challenges has been linked to improved leader effectiveness (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). Within the realm of transformational leadership, we believe that this outcome is related to the

attribute of inspirational motivation – which relates to a leader’s ability to communicate a compelling shared vision for the future (Bass). In essence, leaders who have mature and accurate mental models of the world will be more effective in communicating them to their followers. Based on this, *we believe that leaders who cognitively engage with a traumatic event are more likely to experience post-traumatic leadership development (Proposition #1).*

Productive Framing:

The second mediator that we would like to consider is *productive framing*. We postulate that how a leader ‘frames’ a traumatic event will influence how that experience affects their consequent leadership development. Contemporary psychology literature postulates that we have three distinct concepts of identity, “Self the motivated agent, self as a social actor, and self as an autobiographical author.” (McAdams, 2013). This last sense of self -- self as an autobiographical author -- is characterized by the tendency of individuals to seek to understand their life within the context of a greater narrative (McAdams, 2013).

One such narrative, known as the redemptive narrative, emphasizes the process overcoming adversity in the pursuit one’s purpose (McAdams, 2013). This narrative style tracks the movement from suffering to an enhanced status or state – think Luke Skywalker – and is deeply reflected in American culture – aka. ‘The American Dream.’ This storytelling style also has roots in Christianity via the narratives about atonement and ‘overcoming the world’ (McAdams, 2013).

In their work on post-traumatic growth, researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun asserted that making sense of a traumatic event within the context of one’s life was a key domain that impacted whether a person was able to grow following trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

This leads us to suggest that one way leaders can grow through adversity would be by framing their trauma in a productive way. While it is up to the individual to decide their life narrative, framing the challenge through a redemptive narrative lens -- as something to be learned from, grown through, and which they will ultimately triumph over -- could be helpful to leaders (McAdams, 2013).

Important to note, however, is that the redemptive narrative is not the only way to 'frame' adversity. As McAdams points out, the way someone narrates their life is highly dependent on individual culture (McAdams, 2013). One alternate framing narrative, quite different from the redemptive narrative, is that of suffering as a common human experience. In her work on self-compassion, Dr. Kristen Neff asserts that suffering is common to all of humanity. In her words, compassion – meaning to suffer with -- implies the mutuality of human suffering (Neff). She asserts that recognizing the commonality of human suffering allows us to experience more empathy and compassion for others as well as for ourselves – both of which fall within our broad definition of improved leader effectiveness (Neff, 2015).

Based on this framework, as a leader 'writes' their life narrative, they are compelled to include each experience they face – including adversity and trauma. Our model suggests that how they choose to frame that traumatic event will affect their post traumatic leader development. While there are clearly many more framing narratives that a leader might choose to use as they seek to make sense of trauma (including maladaptive ones), these two give some insight into how the framing of trauma might affect a leader's development. Depending on the narrative style that a leader chooses, they outcomes related to this mediator are closely related to idealized influence and individual consideration. Leaders who frame adversity within a

redemptive narrative may develop attributes that merit their followers respect and admiration – bringing them closer to the *idealized influence* described in transformational leadership literature. Conversely, leaders who frame adversity with compassion, as outlined by Dr. Kristyn Neff, may grow in their ability to offer *individualized consideration* through increased empathy for others (Bass, 1999; Lim & Desteno, 2020). This leads us to posit that *if a leader productively frames adversity, they are more likely to experience leader development post trauma* (Proposition #2).

Affective appraisal:

The third mediator that we would like to consider is *affective appraisal*. In 2014, a group of researchers set out to understand what determined why developmental job experiences (DJE) – tasks meant to encourage employees to stretch beyond their current skillsets – led to employee development in some cases and to dissatisfaction and turnover in others. They explain that when employees are faced with a challenging task at work, depending on their appraisal of the task, they will respond with either positive or negative feelings. The result of this, as explained by the researchers, is that differing emotional appraisals of a task result in different behavior sets -- some of which were adaptive (excitement, passion, and creativity) and some of which were maladaptive (avoidance, blaming and frustration). Interestingly, the researchers found that emotional intelligence played a moderating role in this process (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014).

They also reference transactional stress theory (TST) which suggests that how an employee appraises a stressful work situation – as a challenge or as a threat -- affects their affective experience, which, in turn, influences how they will cope with that experience. For



example, if a person perceives a particular work-related task as a ‘challenge’, they are more likely to experience positive emotions. Whereas, if they appraise it as a threat (in the sense that it creates work demands that could produce harm, loss, or hindrance to themselves), they are most likely to feel negative emotions. Essentially, the way a person appraises an event will affect which emotional response they experience – which will, in turn, influence their coping behavior (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014).

This has some interesting implications for our *Adversity* → *Leader Development* model. Based on transactional stress theory, a leader who experiences a positive emotional appraisal is more likely to respond with coping behaviors that lead to improved leader effectiveness. While productive coping could be related to each of the four components of transformational leadership, we will consider *idealized influence* and *intellectual stimulation* specifically. In their work on developmental job experiences, Dong and Seo cited that individuals experiencing unpleasant feelings may be “less engaged with the developmental tasks, less willing to approach and influence people at work, and less proactive and creative in handling work-related problems” (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014). These outcomes clearly contrast with the *idealized influence* that is characteristic of transformational leaders.

In their work *Making the Mindful Leader*, Hunter and Chaskalson reference a study which found that a leader’s mood affected the coordination and efficiency of their team (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). This leads us to suggest that the affective experience of a leader will influence their team’s willingness to work together to explore new ideas. This directly opposes the *intellectual stimulation* that a transformational leader would encourage within his/her followers.

This evidence leads us to suggest that the affective experience of a leader in the face of trauma has the potential to greatly influence their leadership effectiveness. Therefore, the initial emotional appraisal that a leader experiences in response to a traumatic event will likely determine, to some degree, their consequent leadership development. As a result, we suggest that *a leader's affective appraisal of a traumatic event will affect their consequent leader development (Proposition #3)*. While it is arguably outside a leader's control what emotions they experience in relation to a particular event, Dong and Seo suggest that emotional intelligence plays a moderating role in this process. This leads us to suggest that leaders can, at least indirectly, influence their emotional appraisal of adversity by augmenting their level of emotional intelligence (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014).

#### Emotional acceptance:

The final mediator in our *Adversity → Leader Development* model that we will consider is *emotional acceptance*. Western psychology is founded on the assumption of healthy normality – essentially that the baseline of the human condition is characterized by mostly positive emotions. From this perspective, psychological suffering is generally viewed as abnormal (Harris, 2016). Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) challenges this notion by asserting that a great deal of human suffering stems from our efforts to eliminate our difficult feelings. Proponents of ACT assert that avoidance of thoughts, feelings, memories, and sensations ultimately leads to more suffering than we experienced in the first place (Harris, 2016). In Buddhism, this concept is understood through the parable of *The Second Arrow*:

*It is said the Buddha once asked a student, 'If a person is struck by an arrow, is it painful? If the person is struck by a second arrow, is it even more painful?' He then went on to*

*explain, 'In life, we can't always control the first arrow. However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first. This second arrow is optional (Tanhane, 2014).*

Based on the growing evidence in support of acceptance and commitment therapy as a treatment for diverse psychological challenges, it is likely that the process of accepting uncomfortable feelings could have implications for leader's who are looking to grow from adversity (Gloster, 2020). In their paper on this ACT and post-traumatic stress disorder, Susan Orsillo and Sonja Batten explain that avoidance plays a fundamental role in PTSD and other trauma-related problems (Orsillo & Batten, 2005). According to them, attempts to control thoughts, feelings, and memories contributed to the prolonging of post-traumatic stress disorder. The findings found in this paper highlight the plausible role of emotional acceptance in facilitating post-traumatic leadership development.

Within the realm of transformational leadership, we believe this mediator is most closely linked with the dimensions of *idealized influence* and *individual consideration*. In their paper, Hunter and Chaskalson relate that a leader's stress response can leave them "disoriented, disconnected, fearful, and frustrated" (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). They also share that prolonged stress responses, characterized by the activation of the amygdala, may lead to a leader "freezing" in the face of a threat (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). These negative outcomes clearly lead to a weakened influence of the leader and, according to Hunter and Chaskalson, can also "undermine team effort and weaken commitment to an organization" (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.).

In addition to a diminishing personal influence, we also propose that a lack of emotional acceptance in the face of adversity can diminish a leader's ability to offer *individualized*

*consideration* to their followers. The autonomic response associated with post-traumatic stress have been shown to lead to a 'survival' mindset. In this cognitively impaired state, leaders are less able to relate with others, and are prone to destructive emotions such as rage, anger, and frustration (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). These negative outcomes associated with prolonged stress can be easily understood to reflect a leader's limited ability to individually consider the needs of their followers. Conversely, the practice of accepting one's own emotions, within the framework of mindfulness meditation, has been shown to produce increased feelings of empathy and connectedness with others (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). This leads us to propose that *if a leader practices emotional acceptance, they are more likely to experience leader development post-trauma (Proposition #4).*

#### Mindfulness as a Moderator:

The secondary purpose of this paper is to introduce a potential method of intervention for leaders who hope to develop leadership attributes as a result of the adversity they experience. Mindfulness – defined as the non-judgmental awareness of one's moment-to-moment experience -- has been linked to many positive health-related outcomes (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). Studies have also shown that certain aspects of trait mindfulness are associated with post-traumatic growth (Redekop & Clark, 2016). Recently, mindfulness has also been described as an influential factor in improved leader effectiveness (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.; George, 2012).

Thankfully, evidence shows that trait mindfulness can be cultivated through a practice called mindfulness meditation (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). As we will explore in this section, mindfulness meditation has relevance to each of the four mediators who have chosen for our

*Adversity* → *Leader Development* model. As a result, it is plausible that mindfulness meditation could be a useful resource for leaders who hope to increase their likelihood of growing from adversity. In the following sections, we will consider how mindfulness has the potential to impact each of the four mediators in our model.

We will first consider the relationship mindfulness meditation has with *cognitive engagement*. At first glance, it seems that mindfulness and cognitive engagement are incompatible. While mindfulness practice emphasizes ‘nonjudgmental awareness’ of thoughts and feelings, cognitive engagement requires, as the name implies, the use of the thinking mind (Redkop & Clark, 2016). However, as demonstrated by Henson, Truchot, and Canavello’s review of post-traumatic growth, intrusive rumination was only associated with PTG when it was temporary and short-term (Henson, Truchot, & Canavello, 2021). This suggests that PTG is possible only when individuals are able to ‘step back’ and relate to their ruminations in a more productive way. Therefore, the *non-reactive* aspect of mindfulness could serve to allow ‘psychological space’ for the leader to engage meaningfully with thoughts rather than being swept away by them (Redkop & Clark, 2016). Therefore, mindfulness meditation, could allow the leader to engage meaningfully with traumatic events, leading to personal growth and leader development (Henson, Truchot, & Canavello, 2021).

Our next mediator, *productive framing*, has a similar connection to mindfulness meditation. While the principles of mindfulness do not specifically align with any of the ‘narrative styles’ we have discussed in this paper, the practice may allow individuals more space to choose how they want to frame their life experiences. Mindfulness instruction suggests a *non-identifying* approach to suffering in the sense that thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are

separate from the self (Esch, 2013). This suggests that a person can create distance between themselves from the sensations they are experiencing – yielding a sense ‘spaciousness’ in the mind. Assuming that much of our internal narrative-scripting is typically done outside of our conscious awareness, mindfulness meditation could enable leaders to more intentionally choose how to frame their experience of adversity. Based on our model, this may lead to a more *productive framing* of the trauma on the part of the leader, resulting in leader development.

The third mediator we would like to consider here is that of *emotional appraisal*. In their work on this topic and DJEs, Dong, Bartol, and Seo found that employees’ ability to grow from stressful work tasks was influenced by their emotional appraisal of the task. They also found that emotional intelligence played a moderating role in this process (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014). Interestingly, researchers have found ties between emotional intelligence and mindfulness meditation. In one study, participants who were randomly assigned to a mindfulness meditation group exhibited significant improvements in emotional intelligence and related traits over the control group (Chu, 2010). This leads us to suggest that, while the initial emotional appraisal of trauma might be outside of a leader’s control, mindfulness meditation could serve to enhance their emotional intelligence – in turn helping them to cope more productively. Consequently, as our model would suggest, this would lead to an increased likelihood of leader development post-trauma.

The final mediator we will look at is *emotional acceptance*. Of the four mediators in our model, this has the most obvious connection to mindfulness meditation. In fact, acceptance and commitment therapy actually finds its roots in mindfulness principles (Harris, 2016). Within

mindfulness meditation, individuals are asked to observe thoughts and feelings without judgement or reaction; this relates directly to the idea of accepting challenging emotions (Redkop, & Clark, 2016). Furthermore, in their work *Making the Mindful Leader*, Hunter and Chaskalson cite that mindfulness meditation can reduce emotional reactivity. While this was referring to the leader's reactivity to those around them, it also likely implies a decreased reactivity to one's own internal experiences (Hunter & Chaskalson, n.d.). Based on these connections, we propose that mindfulness meditation would foster a greater degree of emotional acceptance in the leader -- resulting in leader development post-trauma. In summary, this leads us to assert that *mindfulness meditation moderates the relationships between the mediators of our model* [cognitive engagement, productive framing, affective appraisal, and emotional acceptance] *and post-traumatic leader development (Proposition #5)*. In colloquial terms, we believe that these connections demonstrate the potential effectiveness of mindfulness in influencing a leader's ability to develop leader attributes as a result of the trauma they face.

#### Conclusion & Future Research:

The purpose of this paper was to understand the process by which leaders can respond to adversity by developing further leadership attributes. Based on the four mediators of cognitive engagement, productive framing, affective appraisal, and emotional acceptance, our model suggests one possible framework for this process. Additionally, we proposed mindfulness meditation as a viable way for leader's to proactively influence their ability to develop leadership attributes as a result of trauma. This practice serves as a moderator in our model. Further research could include empirical testing and further exploration of this topic. As

we further understand the relationship between suffering and leader development, we may discover previously untapped opportunities for leadership growth within our businesses, communities, and families. We believe that our model has implications for leaders and future leaders who experience trauma or adversity. Ultimately, the principles set forth in this paper will benefit the leader who – whether they currently carry a formal leadership or not – hopes to understand how to develop his or her leadership capabilities as a result of the trauma they face.

### **Reflective Writing:**

As some of you may know, this was not my original capstone topic. Originally, I was planning on completing a project in Puerto Rico on the topic of financial inclusion and investing preferences. As a matter of circumstance, I was not able to carry this project to completion due to timeline constraints, IRB delays, and personal factors. While this was unfortunate at the time, this afforded me the opportunity to explore another topic that is very interesting to me – resulting in this paper. I am ultimately grateful that I was able to complete my capstone project on this current topic. I have deepened my understanding of leadership, of the process of research, and of the value of persistence. In this reflection, I will outline how this project acts as a capstone of my undergraduate education, prepared me for the future, and allowed me to develop relationships with my faculty friends. I will also share how this project afforded me valuable research experience and exposed me to new ways of thinking. Finally, I will articulate how this project helped me to engage with the broader community in a meaningful way.

During my undergraduate education, I have attempted to engage with topics meaningfully and to foster a sense of genuine interest in what I was learning about. During my



third year, I decided to take this a step further by completing an independent study course on a topic that I had become genuinely interested in. I was interested in learning about how psychology intersected with leadership theory. I contacted a faculty member, and he agreed to mentor me on this project. We eventually settled on the topic of adversity and how it impacts leader development. The final deliverable for this project was a mock-draft of a scholarly paper on how leaders can grow through adversity. This was not a publishable paper, but it introduced me to the process of reviewing literature and attempting to make a meaningful contribution. It is fitting that for my final capstone project, I was able to take the same topic and complete a publishable scholarly paper. This final project has been, by far, the most in-depth research project that I have even attempted. This capstone project allowed me to dig deeper into the literature in order to ground my research in the literature and then to produce a paper that I feel adds meaningfully to the pool of knowledge on the topic. While I am still deciding whether I will pursue a doctoral or master's degree in the near future, the process of building upon past works to create novel research taught me about the process by which knowledge is discovered in the realm of academia. I am grateful for the opportunity, and encouragement, to engage with a research project in this way.

Something that was very important to me as I completed this project was that my research would have a real-world impact. With the previous project I had planned, this would have occurred in the form of financial literacy classes and the potential for increased access to financial tools. With this project, however, I had to consider how I would make my research relevant and applicable to people's lives in order to fulfill that goal. As I completed the paper and developed my model, mindfulness meditation surfaced as a way for leaders to proactively

influence their leader development as a result of adversity. As I completed my community action project for Community Engaged Scholars, I felt that I could connect my research to a real-world need. I ended up reaching out to CAPSA, and they told me that they were developing a leader development course and would like to utilize my research to inform a session in their course. I was able to write a draft lesson plan and send it to them. This was really exciting because they told me that they would use this info I shared to help the people they work with. In addition to this organization, I hope to apply the principles I learned about leader development in my own life and as I am given opportunities to influence and lead others.

During this project, I was able to develop many meaningful relationships with faculty. Because I technically had two capstone proposals, my support network was especially large. For my first project, I worked closely with Ben Blau and Lucas Rentschler. During this project I went through the process of securing funding, designing an economic experiment, and applying for IRB approval. While this project didn't come to fruition, I feel that the learning experiences I had with it were just as valuable as those that came from my actual capstone project. I also feel that the connections I made with those faculty impacted my education greatly and I hope to stay connected with them into the future. With my current project, I was able to work closely with Bret Crane, whom I deeply respect and admire. He has mentored me in personal and professional matters, as well as on this research project. Something that I found especially valuable was that he taught me about the different types of research within the field of management. As this is a theory paper, he showed me a very helpful way of outlining an introduction of a scholarly paper and offered very valuable guidance on the paper itself. We are

planning on publishing this paper in *The Journal of Student Leadership* following its successful submission to Honors.

In all, this project allowed me to explore my interests within an interdisciplinary context. I enjoyed my business classes but have always carried an interest in the sciences – particularly biology. In writing this paper, I dove into the literature intersecting the fields of neuroscience, suffering, and psychology. This was a very neat experience for me. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the topic I chose, I feel that I have become an expert on this particular intersection of research and can honestly speak to the research that has been done. This is an empowering feeling, and it gives me confidence in reading literature moving forward. I hope to apply an interdisciplinary mindset in my career moving forward, and this project has given me confidence to do this. I think it is incredible that once you feel confident reading literature, you can essentially learn about anything.

Ultimately, I am very grateful for my experience with this capstone, and with Honors in general. I feel proud of my work with this paper as I have never put so much work into grounding something in literature and thinking deeply about each argument that I make. I was very careful to avoid unfounded statements, which was a powerful learning process for me. As I move forward in my academic and professional career, I feel confident having completed a work that, in my opinion, truly serves as a capstone to my undergraduate career.

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### **Author Bio:**

Isaac will graduate with Honors from Utah State University with bachelor's degrees in international business and economics and minors in Entrepreneurship and Leadership. During his Undergrad, Isaac applied the honors values by exercising his passion for entrepreneurship, leadership, and research. He has worked on projects in the Dominican Republic, led humanitarian groups to Puerto Rico, and served in various leadership positions at the University. He was also on the team that won the 2021 Enactus Sustainable Development goal pitch in the category of Decent Work and Economic Growth. Isaac and his wife recently opened Shake that Cake, and unique dessert business that is located here in Cache Valley. Isaac eventually hopes to work in developing countries to help solve some of the worlds challenging social issues through entrepreneurship and innovation.