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# Leadership Response to the Global Crisis: A Collective Case Study

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Leadership Response to the Global Crisis: A Collective Case Study

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By

Theresa A. Thompson

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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**UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Doctor of Education and hereby approve the dissertation. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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Date

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this interpretive collective case study, I studied how leaders responded and what they learned during the 2008 and 2009 global recession. Companies in the United States are experiencing turbulent economic times and complicated global challenges. As a result of these new challenges, American companies and their leaders are facing increased levels of ambiguity. The requirements of leadership are changing as the challenges and issues facing leaders today are becoming more complex and less restricted by the national boundaries.

Four senior executive leaders, representing a variety of industries, participated in the study. Each of the four cases is told in a narrative format that described the individual experience of each case. Interviews with participants are the primary data source, triangulated with interviews from those who were best positioned to witness the leaders' behavior during the global recession. Data analysis across all four of the cases provided insight into the four major themes that emerged: the essentials of dealing with looming uncertainty, the essentials of focusing on what is important, the importance of a connection to the organization, and the benefits of the feeling that everyone is in this together.

This research is significant because it deeply examined the leadership practices and associated learning during the global recession. This study is significant for the fields of organization development and leadership in that there are implications for future application of the findings.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction and Background**

The recession in 2008 and 2009, which followed the collapse of sub-prime mortgages in the United States, caused far-reaching impact in other nations. As a result of instability in the United States, currently the world's largest economy, the global economy became unpredictable and volatile: "Homeowners defaulted on mortgages in San Diego, and suddenly people in Iceland are paying more for gasoline" (Surowiecki, 2008). The volatility created uncertainties and the impact of the interconnectedness between the United States and other nations created new challenges for global leaders. As a result of the recession, businesses and organizations are faced with increasingly complex challenges. Today's world has become a more complex and constantly changing environment which presents new challenges for global leaders.

In addition to its complexity, the world is flat. The "flattening" of the world is a process by which individuals and companies need to work and lead in an environment that is becoming less restricted by geographic boundaries as globalization continues to emerge (Friedman, 2005). Given the increased connectedness and complexities of global nations, leadership is no longer a heroic solo act (Martin, 2007). The requirements of leadership are changing as the challenges and issues facing leaders today are becoming more complex and less restricted by the national boundaries. As the boundaries of individual countries continue to figuratively dissolve and impact global companies and organizations, the skills needed for successful global leadership will continue to evolve.

As a global finance leader and member of senior leadership teams for global companies over the past nine years, I have become increasingly aware of the changing world and the implications to leadership in global enterprises. My work in China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Hong

Kong, Belgium, Germany, Italy, France, England, the Netherlands, Ukraine, Mexico, Brazil and Canada has broadened my perspectives of business. I have witnessed increased complexities, new technologies, and a global recession which have aided in making business conditions more volatile and unpredictable. For the past several years, I have been interested in understanding the leadership competencies that will be required for future global leaders in our changing multi-dimensional world. For this study, I was specifically interested in gaining a deeper understanding of how global leaders were able to navigate the stormy waters of the 2008 and 2009 recession and what they learned from their experiences.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The rapid changes in the worldwide economy have caused considerable distress and disruption over the past few years as globalization unfolds. As emerging countries continue to jockey for position on the world stage, future economic circumstances are “inconceivable” (Dror, 2001) and “unknowable” (Stacey, 1992). Companies in the United States are experiencing turbulent economic times, ever changing new technologies, and complicated global challenges. As a result of these new challenges, American companies are facing increased levels of ambiguity. It is essential that we understand the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed to lead global enterprises during these turbulent and uncertain times. The skills required may be different than the leadership competencies that previously worked for senior executives.

Research that focuses on understanding the experiences of global executives during the recent recession is timely because the complexities for leaders will be ever increasing as globalization continues to emerge and take form. The ability to be an effective and successful leader during these changing times will increase an organization’s ability to adapt to the changing conditions and be successful.

Research has been conducted to understand crisis management, crisis leadership, and leadership. However, little research has been conducted to understand the specific experiences of senior executives who led global organizations through the 2008 and 2009 recession.

Despite the impact of the global recession crisis on executive leaders, little is known about the specifics of individual leaders' experiences during the crisis. The focus of this research was to explore how global executive leaders responded to the global recession and what they learned from their experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

The purpose of this research was to understand and examine the leadership practices of four senior executives during the 2008 and 2009 global recession. My intent was to gain an understanding of the executive leaders' experiences and their responses to the recession. I wanted to gain insights into their knowledge that might be applied in the future to assist other leaders and organizations during these turbulent economic times. *My research question was: How did global executive leaders respond to the global recession crisis and what did they learn?*

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms will be used for this study:

**Globalization.** Northouse (2007) defined *globalization* as the increased interdependence (economic, social, technical, and political) between nations. This study incorporated this definition.

**Passion.** For the purpose of this study, passion is defined as a strong emotion, specifically, boundless enthusiasm (Farlex, 2003).

**Recession.** A period of general economic decline typically defined as a decline in gross domestic product for two or more consecutive quarters. A recession is typically accompanied by a drop in the stock market, an increase in unemployment, and a decline in the housing market (Shiskin, 1974). This study focused on the recession that took place throughout 2008 and into 2009.

## **Summary**

Tomorrow's leaders will need to manage new global challenges and be able to face uncertainty head on: This means leaders and organizations need to accept the fact that they have no idea what is going to happen (Stacey, 1992). As the world continues to evolve and geographical borders continue to become transparent, it is critical that organizations understand the components needed to be a successful leader in the future. Leaders will need to resonate with the people on the global stage, while still maintaining authenticity in local countries. Global organizations will need to consider what is required for future leaders who are capable of looking ahead and tackling the new challenges and opportunities in our unpredictable globalized world.

My personal interest in doing this research was to understand how executive leaders led during this time of global change and financial uncertainty, so that other leaders can learn from their experiences. In addition, I wanted to know what was learned by the leaders so that other global leaders are better positioned to lead their own teams and organizations in the future. On a personal level, as a global finance leader, I experienced difficult challenges as I led my own organization during this troubled time. I was interested to learn what the experience was like for others and how I might learn from their stories.

This study focused on understanding senior executives who led people and organizations through the 2008 and 2009 global financial crisis. The study is significant because it might apply insights which can be applied to future leadership.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

I utilized Academic Source Premier, Business Source Premier, Emerald, ERIC, Psych INFO, and other dissertations and theses to conduct the literature review for this research. I used the databases to search for articles and other publications. For the literature review, I conducted searches for the following terms: globalization, global leadership, leadership, executive leadership, crisis leadership, crisis management, leadership effectiveness, organizational connectedness and organizational commitment. I ultimately selected three topics for my literature review: globalization, leadership, and organization commitment.

#### **Globalization**

Globalization is a concept that is best described as an emerging topic. There is much debate around globalization and numerous attempts to define it. While globalization has been mentioned in publications dating back to the 1960s and earlier, arguments and studies have been published more frequently since the 1990s. While much has been written about the topic of globalization, there is not a widely accepted definition or description of what globalization actually entails.

In recent years, the discussions of globalization have centered on the breaking down of national barriers and the interconnectedness of nations. In addition, the debate has expanded to include potential implications to leadership.

Northouse (2007) defined globalization as the increased interdependence (economic, social, technical, and political) among nations. Similarly, Gardner (2008) claimed that globalization consists of a set of factors that weaken or even eliminate individual states. Castells (2003) argued that the globalizing world is one where countries are not individually powerful,

but have power when combined with other nations. In the new era of globalization, individual entities will struggle if they attempt to act on their own. As countries require partnerships with other nations, there will be implications for leaders of American companies. Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton (1999) described globalization as interconnectedness between aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual. This description is significant because it broadens the concept of globalization outside of the financial and economic realm and into the social sciences.

Much of the literature regarding globalization is centered on its impact to organizations. Mitroff, Mason, and Pearson (1994) expressed that the design of organizations and leadership needs to change radically in order to meet the problems of our increasingly complex world. They presented arguments that organizations need to radically restructure to be able to manage global competitiveness, crisis management, and issues management. Steger (2003) presented that globalization is more than bringing home profits.

Globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges, while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant, between the haves and the have-nots. (p. 103)

The changing dynamics in the world continue to refine our definition and understanding of globalization. The powers of globalization not only reach into the economic and political forums, but also challenge previously held cultural and ethical assumptions. While the definition of globalization is not agreed upon, the one common theme is change and evolution.

## **Global Leadership**

A study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) found that 84 percent of participants believed that the definition of leadership has changed in the last five years (Martin, 2007). In addition, more than 60 percent agreed that leaders are facing challenges that are beyond their individual capabilities. The researchers found globalization to be one of the drivers of this leadership shift. Globalization is breeding increased complexity and increased need for new leadership styles and characteristics.

The literature on global leadership recognizes the executive leaders' skills will need to evolve as leadership is impacted by globalization. Global leadership, unlike domestic leadership, involves the interactions of people and ideas among many different cultures, rather than within the home country (Adler, 1999). The cross-cultural interaction, rather than mono-cultural interaction, poses different challenges for leaders. McGarvie (2009) presented that the "globe is shaking" and American leaders find themselves caught off balance as the globe begins to shake faster and faster. She argued a new style of fearless and flexible leadership will be required for leaders in the future. Chambers, Drysdale, and Hughes (2010) used the term "*crisis of leadership*" to argue that companies will need new types of leaders given the increased level of complexity in the world. The researchers further argued this complexity is, in part, driven by the interconnectedness of nations. They described the criteria for global leadership, which include new skills such as sense making, relating, inventing, and visioning (Chambers et al., 2010). De Vries and Florent-Treacy (2005) concluded that vision, mission, cultural, and strategic factors in an organization must be aligned in order to experience success on the world stage. They compiled information for 12 years from seminars and studied their global leadership database. They found successful global leaders were able to rise above the particularities of numerous

regions, while at the same time meeting the expectations of followers in those individual regions. In fact, some the best performing global organizations are geocentrically focused and prefer to have no national identity.

The research regarding business crisis management was limited. James and Wooten (2010) defined a business crisis as

A rare and significant situation that has the potential to become public and bring about highly undesirable outcomes for the firm and its stakeholder, including: injury or death, negative or unwanted publicity, financial or reputational ruin, and enhanced political, governmental, or regulatory scrutiny therefore requiring immediate corrective action by firm leaders. (p. 17)

The leadership skills required to lead through a crisis may be unique and different compared to leadership skills required during ordinary times (James & Wooten, 2010). James & Wooten further argued that times of crisis are typically bound by time constraints, ambiguity, conflicting information, and a need for immediate and decisive action. They continued to describe crisis leadership as a frame of mind accompanied by a key set of behaviors. The frame of mind includes openness and the belief that all things are possible. In the late 1980s, Peter Vaill began to see the emerging business environment as one of chaos and rapid change. He termed the new challenge “leading in a world of permanent white water” which references turbulent river rapids (1996).

Crisis leadership is more complex in a global environment. James & Wooten (2010) claimed that effective leadership during a global crisis requires a network of integrated and supporting systems which can quickly be activated to solve issues. The success of this network requires that the leader have the ability to understand the implications of decisions and actions in

different political and financial environments. The researchers further argued the complexity, abruptness, and unpredictability of a crisis in a global environment creates challenges for organizations.

Since 2009, there has been a growing interest in global leadership that will be required post recession. Gilbert and DeVilbiss (2010) said that three core values will guide global organizations during turbulent times: consciousness, reality, and cooperation. They further claimed that the most compelling lesson learned in the financial crisis was that the global economy is interconnected. As a result, business leaders must work together to develop new models and strategies for organizations to be successful in the next decade. Maccoby and Scudder (2010) argued that in order to succeed at navigating complex global challenges, leaders must think systematically about the human values and drives which are expressed through work. They further argued that effective conflict management in organizations post recession includes engaging both the head and the heart. Greenberg and Sweeney (2011) concluded that the world is still dealing with looming uncertainty and tomorrow's leaders will need to better manage ambiguity. They further argued that successful leaders in the future will not have all the answers; however, they will recognize the right answers when they hear and see them. Miller (2010) presented that the future will continue to be a mystery, and the leaders of tomorrow will need to be masters at managing the uncertain. Collins (2010) stated that the most successful organizations in the future will know best what they should not change. Maintaining a high level of awareness about what is working will be required during turbulent times. He further argued that the defining boundary of success will be one that is based on purpose and values, and held together by a strong commitment to the organization. James and Wooten (2010) said that technology should be considered to facilitate collaboration and coordination. In addition, they

argued cultural values need to be considered during decision making processes, and leaders must broaden their cultural mindsets to understand the potential implications and impacts of their decisions.

A study conducted by the IBM Institute for Business Value and IBM Strategy & Change sought to understand how leaders are responding to the complex global environment post recession. The study included the combined insights from 1,541 interviews with CEO's and other senior level executive leaders. The study concluded that successful global organizations will need to: (a) embody creative leadership, (b) reinvent customer relationships, and (c) build operating dexterity.

Northouse (2007) stated leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. When the individuals are located in multiple countries during a recession, it becomes increasingly complex to influence them.

### **Organizational Commitment**

I did not consider organizational commitment as part of my initial literature review. However, as a result of my research, I discovered it is a critical element. Loyalty and perseverance during difficult times are often addressed through the study of organizational commitment. Meyer and Allen (1991) describe commitment to an organization as an emotional attachment and identification with the organization. This identification with the purpose, mission, and values of the organization results in a feeling of loyalty on the part of the employee. Other previous research links organizational commitment to specific characteristics of work, such as job contentment (Dunham, Grube, & Castaneda, 1994; Iverson & Buttigieg, 1999). Shore and Wayne (1993) argued organizational commitment is a result of the direct support employees feel they receive from the organization. Meyer and Allen (1991) and Meyer, Irving,

and Allen (1998 and 1991) presented that favorable experiences in the workplace are powerful drivers of commitment. These experiences might be higher-level organizational values and beliefs, or the result of interactions with managers and fellow employees.

In recent years, research has shifted to organizational commitment in the context of uncertain and turbulent times. Organizational researchers have previously recognized that uncertainty is a normal and unavoidable part of organizational life (Duncan, 1972; Milliken, 1987), and the workplace is dominated by uncertainty (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois & Callan, 2004; Hui & Lee, 2000). Panaccio and Vandenberghe (2011) claimed that reducing uncertainty for employees is crucial in today's environment. They further argued organizations will need to increase the levels of employee commitment in an effort to retain talent. In addition, they argued that organization-based self-esteem was positively associated with affective commitment. Agarwal (2011) said that employee commitment to an organization is a critical success factor in today's corporate environment. He further argued that employees commitment levels were impacted during the restructuring and downsizing that took place during the global recession. Marques (2008) presented that people who feel a commitment to an organization will be more willing to seek solutions and work as a team during downtimes. In addition, they will want to ensure a prolonged existence of their individual departments, and ultimately their organization.

## **Summary**

Previous research focused on the topic of leadership required for the post recession era. While the studies mentioned have focused on the topic of global leadership and crisis management, I did not find any in-depth studies that used multiple cases which were triangulated with individuals best positioned to witness the leadership of those being studied. The research

on organizational commitment has shown a tie to employee commitment and organizational success.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

Interpretive research seeks to understand and explain human and social reality (Crotty, 1998) and how individuals make sense of their world and their experiences (Merriam, 1998). An interpretive researcher uses an emerging approach to inquiry, one that is inductive and establishes patterns and themes (Creswell, 2007). It is focused on process, meaning, and understanding which can reveal how the parts of a particular system work together to form a whole (Merriam, 1998).

The focus of this research was to understand and examine the leadership practices of the senior executives during the 2008 and 2009 global recession. In addition I was seeking to capture the knowledge of the leaders and reveal patterns therein which would provide further understanding. Therefore, an interpretive approach was appropriate.

### **Research Design**

In conducting this research I chose an interpretive methodology, a collective case study, also known as multiple case studies. Case study research is “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Case studies are unique in that the area to be examined has boundaries. For example, a group of managers or a production site may be selected as a case study because people in particular programs or at certain sites would be considered the bounded system. The specific case has working parts and is considered to be an integrated system (Stake, 2006). In addition, case studies are conducted over a period of time through detailed data collection with information from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007). According to Stake, “We are interested in cases for their uniqueness and commonality” (1995), and a case study is valuable for what “it can reveal about a phenomenon,

knowledge, we would not otherwise have access to” (Merriam, 1998, p. 33). The intent of case study research is to seek a greater understanding of the case and appreciate the complexity and uniqueness of it (Stake, 1995).

Multiple case study research begins with the “*quintain*” (Stake, 2006). The quintain, as described by Stake, is an object or phenomenon or condition to be studied and understood. The cases are organized around at least one research question asking what is most important to understand about the quintain (Stake, 2006). In an effort to understand the quintain, the researcher studies single cases. Then the researcher studies the similarities and differences across all the cases to better understand the quintain.

In this collective case study, the phenomenon studied was the leadership practices and processes that were used during the global recession and what the leaders learned from their actions. My intent was to understand their experiences, from their perspectives, and to capture the themes across their stories. Examining how the phenomenon performs in different environments is an important reason to perform collective case study (Stake, 2006). In an effort to understand the quintain each individual case must first be studied (Stake, 2006).

My research question was: *How did global executive leaders respond to the global recession crisis and what did they learn?* I wanted to learn what the experience was like for them. I wanted to learn what they did, what strategies they used, and the processes they utilized. I wanted to understand how they felt and how the experience has changed their lives.

### **Case Study Criteria**

Stake (2006) presented three main guidelines for selecting cases: the case must be relevant to the quintain, the cases must provide diversity across contexts, and the cases should provide opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts. Using Stakes guidelines I used

four primary criteria for the selection of specific cases that might help me understand the quintain:

- The leader needed to be employed at a director level or higher. Some examples of appropriate positions are director, vice president, CEO, or CFO. This provision helped ensure the executive had accountability for leadership decisions and outcomes at the most senior level. This approach also enabled the study of multiple levels of positions.
- The executive needed to have been employed in the position from January 2008 through June 2009. This time period was chosen because it covered the majority of the global crisis and related recession. This requirement enabled me to understand many of the events and experiences over the majority of the recession period.
- The leader needed to have global responsibility. The financial crisis affected the global economy and the perspective I was interested in was one that had leadership responsibility inside and outside of the United States.
- The leader needed to have financial decision making responsibility and accountability. This requirement was selected to help ensure the executive had accountability for decisions made and the responsibility of financial performance during a recession and financial crisis.

### **Participant Selection**

To locate participants for my research, I relied on my personal network of colleagues, friends, family, and previous employers. Given my broad background and extensive international network, I believed I would be able to obtain sufficient participants.

I received approval from the Institutional Review Board on November 30, 2011 to begin my research. After reviewing my personal network I sent a letter to my potential participants (see Appendix A). The potential participants included past and present co-workers, professional colleagues, students, and family members. I sent the letter to people who I believed met the four criteria required for participation. In my email I asked them to forward the letter onto others who also might meet the criteria. I did not target a specific gender or industry.

Nine executives from my personal network responded as potential candidates for my study. The executives initially contacted me via email or telephone. After the initial contact, I interviewed each participant to have a more in-depth conversation in which I could determine their eligibility.

Ultimately I selected four participants. Multiple case studies are limited if the number of cases chosen is fewer than four or greater than 10 (Stake, 2006). Stake argued that two or three cases do not show enough uniqueness or commonality across the cases; while more than 10 cases may provide more uniqueness than a researcher can understand. Of the participants, two were executives I did not know and had never met. One participant is a close professional colleague and one participant is a former colleague with whom I worked on multiple occasions. I believed the participants represented a broad perspective across different industries, positions, and functional expertise. I also believed the cases I selected would increase my understanding of the quintain by examining the similarities and differences in the cases.

After I selected the four executive leaders, I asked each of them to provide me the names of four others who were in a position to witness their leadership during the recession. The others could be a boss, peer, supervisor, direct report, or colleague. I chose two names, in confidence, from each list and contacted the individuals via email or telephone. Two potential participants,

given to me by the same leader, indicated they were not interested in participating so I chose the other two names from the list that was provided to me. Ultimately I was able to select two participants, in confidence, for each of the executive leaders.

### **Data Collection**

The most common methods of case study are observations, interviews, and review of documents (Stake, 2006). Patton (1990) argued that multiple information sources are needed because there is not one single source that can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective. I primarily used face-to-face interviews combined with a review of documents to conduct my study. In addition, I used follow up interviews and websites.

**Interviews.** The main purpose of interviews is to find out what is “in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Since researchers cannot observe feelings and thoughts, they have to ask people questions about these things (Patton, 1990). I interviewed the participants using a semi structured interview approach (Merriam, 1998). I prepared open-ended questions in advance (see Appendix D and Appendix E), yet I allowed for flexibility to ask probing questions. The participants’ insights and perspectives emerged due to the open-ended questions and the flexible and exploratory nature of the interview. The worldviews and ideas of the participants were revealed as we talked.

The interviews were conducted in a space selected by the participants. All locations were private environments that enabled an open and friendly conversation. I interviewed three of the executives in person and one executive over the phone. The latter participant is one with whom I have a close professional relationship and the phone did not hinder or limit our discussion. Of the eight supporting interviews with witnesses, six were conducted in person and two over the phone. The participants signed a consent form (see Appendix C) at the beginning of the

interview. I reviewed the consent form with them and answered their questions. For interviews conducted over the phone, the participant was sent a consent form and they mailed it back to me. During the interviews, my role was to listen, take field notes, ask for clarification, and ask follow up questions when needed. I tried to listen carefully and not allow my presence or biases to affect the information. I was aware of my body language and my tone and kept focused on the interview and the participant.

The interviews took place between December 5, 2011 and December 28, 2011. Each interview was recorded and transcribed by me. Transcriptions took place within 12 hours of the interview. This process allowed me to complete the transcriptions and add notes while the information was fresh in my mind.

**Journal.** Within two hours of each interview, I wrote in a personal journal to record my observations, reactions, feelings, and biases regarding the study. The journaling also provided me an outlet for self examination and reflection as I worked through my research.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Merriam (1998), “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (p. 178). Merriam argued that data analysis is a “complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts”.

**Individual case analysis.** In order to maintain consistency with accepted practice in case study analysis, I first analyzed the individual cases to understand and present a detailed description of each case and setting according to the approach of Creswell (2007). In addition, the four individual cases were studied to understand what makes them unique and to understand what the cases have in common (Stake, 1995). According to the approach recommended by Foss and Waters (2007), I focused the data analysis on two units of analysis: (a) each executive

leader's responses to the global recession and (b) what each leader learned from the results of those responses.

After each interview I transcribed the data within 12 hours so the information was still fresh in my mind. Immediately after each transcription, I listened to the interview again in its entirety and made any necessary adjustments. I recorded reflections and observations in the margins.

I printed the transcriptions and reviewed the data with a coding system. I searched the data for examples of the two units of analysis. Once I located them, I wrote a code next to the excerpt in the margin. I went through all the pages of my data in this manner, continuing to mark and code the units of analysis. After coding all of the data, I cut out each excerpt and grouped the excerpts into categories. As Merriam (1998) advised, the categories "reflect the purpose of the research" (p. 183). This coding system helped identify the themes and patterns that emerged.

**Cross-case analysis.** I used cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006) to gain an understanding of the aggregate cases that I studied. My focus was to understand the quintain, both the commonalities and differences across all the cases to be able to describe what phenomena the leaders experienced as they guided their organizations through the global crisis. True comprehension of the phenomena requires not only knowing the experiences under one set of conditions, but also understanding the experiences under various conditions and multiple settings (Stake, 2006). It is the particular events of each case, understood across an array of cases, which I was seeking to understand. I reviewed each individual case in the context of the other cases in an effort to find patterns in the data.

Using qualitative research methods, I analyzed the data from the four cases that were studied in order to identify themes that emerged. In a multiple case study, “there are two stages of analysis—the *within case analysis* and the *cross-case analysis* (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). For stage 1, the within case analysis, I treated each case as a “comprehensive case in and of itself” (Merriam, 1998, p. 194) and gathered data to analyze each single case. Each case was written as a narrative with supporting quotes by the participants. The data was triangulated through participant interviews with those individuals who were best positioned to witness the individual cases. These participants were peers, colleagues, direct reports, and superiors. As a result of this analysis, themes for each case emerged. I validated these findings through member checks from the participants.

For stage 2, the cross-case analysis, I reviewed each case within the context of all cases to find themes and patterns across all the cases. I attempted “to build a general explanation that fit each of the individual cases, even those the cases varied in their details” (Yin, 1994, p. 122). I used the constant comparative method by Merriam, (1998) to compare and group data to find relationships and similar topics. I began with the first case and listed the themes and categories. As I added the other cases, I continued to combine topics that seemed to go together or be connected in some way. I modified and expanded the categories until themes began to emerge. At each stage, I refined the analysis based on the relevance of the data in relation to the interrelated categories. The categories became the findings of the research.

### **Validity**

In addition to interviewing the executive leader, I interviewed two other members of the organization in order to provide a broader perspective of the leader’s response to the global recession. The other members were peers, direct reports, superiors, or other employees.



According to Stake (2006), co-observers, witnesses, and reviewers increase the validity of the case study. This triangulation increased my assurance of what I was seeing and hearing.

After each interview, I transcribed the data within 12 hours so the information was still fresh in my mind. Immediately after each transcription, I listened to the interview again in its entirety and made any necessary adjustments. I recorded reflections and observations in the margins. Stake (2006) described member checking as the examination of rough drafts of data to review for accuracy. I used member checking after the initial interviews. Within two weeks of his or her interview, each participant was given two weeks to review the transcripts and make any modifications. This procedure involved the participants' reading the interview transcriptions and agreeing that I had captured their thoughts and recollections accurately. The purpose of this member checking was to ensure accuracy of information.

Personal memory is important. In order to make my memory more reliable, I kept logs which included names, numbers, dates and times, and other field notes. I used my journal to record my biases at this beginning of the study which enabled me to be aware of my biases as I began my research.

After my initial completion of cross-case analysis, I sent the themes and subthemes that emerged to each of the executive leaders who participated. One participant made two small changes and three participants did not make any changes to the transcripts. Ultimately, they agreed the findings were consistent with their experiences.

I used my personal journal in my data analysis to reflect on my personal thoughts in an effort control my biases to ensure they did not influence my findings. One of the participants is a former colleague of mine. In that particular case, I recorded my reactions more extensively in an effort to not allow my bias to influence my findings.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this research was to understand and examine the leadership practices of four senior executives during the 2008 and 2009 global recession. My research question was: How did global executive leaders respond to the global recession crisis and what was learned by these leaders? I studied four individual cases using a collective case study methodology.

Stake (1995) argued the “write-up can be organized in any way that contributes to the reader’s understanding”. Stake also argued a case report should fall somewhere between a traditional research report and storytelling. Two primary uses of case studies are to obtain the descriptions and the interpretations of others (Stake, 1995). First, in this chapter, I present the findings within each of the individual cases. My goal was to present enough description in order to provide a vicarious type of experience for the reader (Merriam, 1998). Each case is reported in a narrative format. Second, I present the findings from the cross-case analysis. The analysis across all cases presents the quintain (Stake, 2006). The quintain, as described by Stake, is an object or phenomenon or condition to be studied and understood. In this collective case study, the phenomenon studied was the leadership practices and processes that were used during the global recession and the knowledge gained by each of the leaders.

#### **Profiles of Participants**

The participants represented a variety of industries. One of the organizations was a global manufacturing company with over two thousand employees and operations in over 15 countries. Another was a global services and solutions company which serves customers in over 50 countries. Two participants were from the same organization, a global leader in the beauty products and services. Two participants were female and two were male. All participants were

college graduates in their forties. Three of the participants hold master’s degrees. In an effort to protect the identity of all participants, I have used pseudonyms to protect all individuals mentioned in this study, including company names. Profiles of the witnesses to the executive participants are not included in order to protect their identities.

Table 1

*Profiles of Research Participants*

<u>Participant Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Time in Position</u>	<u>Time at Company</u>	<u>Level of Education</u>
Sid	45	Vice President	2 years	3 years	Masters Degree
Sophie	48	Director	4 years	4 years	Masters Degree
Simon	49	Vice President	4 years	22 years	Bachelors Degree
Samantha	45	Vice President	11 years	12 years	Masters Degree

**Individual Case Presentations**

The following individual case presentations are presented in no particular order. At times during the interviews, the participants used words which were space fillers such as “so” and “um,” swear words, and there were instances where multiple sentences ran together as one. In these situations, I made the grammatical correction but did not change the meaning of what the participant was communicating. All participants in this study were given pseudonyms in an effort to protect their privacy. Company names and references to other individuals have also been changed to protect the identities of all involved.

**Sid, Vice President of Operations for Global Manufacturing Corporation (Company A)**

Sid is a professional colleague in my network. I worked with him over the course of two years in 2009 and 2010. Sid was responsible for the global operations, and I was responsible for

the financial performance of the business unit. Our business unit generated \$350 million of annual revenue. Our areas of responsibility overlapped and required that we spend time working together. He has since relocated to another state and moved on to other opportunities.

We were unable to coordinate our travel schedules so I decided to interview him over the telephone. While I would have preferred the interview to have taken place in person, I decided the distance would not be a barrier given the nature of our relationship. I had spent many hours on the phone and in person with Sid over the years and felt the spirit and nature of our interaction would not be adversely affected by meeting on the telephone. At his request, I called Sid at 6:00 a.m., and his voice was warm and excited. Even though the hour was early, he was excited to talk to me and share his experiences. Our initial interview lasted 90 minutes; however, he did place numerous follow up calls and emails to me over the next 30 days to share additional perspectives and experiences.

Sid spent the majority of his career at a large public manufacturing corporation with over 25,000 employees. The company serves customers in over 200 countries. His personal work experience spans across many countries, and he is an expert at global manufacturing, global sourcing, and Lean Six Sigma. He also spent a significant portion of his career working on leadership initiatives and global diversity.

Sid was initially hired at Company A as a manufacturing manager. Company A is a global manufacturing company headquartered in the United States with operations and sales offices in approximately 15 other countries. The company employs over 2,000 employees. Annual revenue is approximately \$400 million, and two-thirds of the company's revenue is earned from customers outside of the United States.

Within one year of employment at Company A, Sid was promoted to Vice President of Operations and Global Manufacturing. In his new role, he was responsible for an organization of over 300 people in approximately 11 countries. His overall responsibility included global responsibility for operations, sourcing, and service organization.

A few months after his promotion, the company began to see a decline in orders. The collapse of the sub-prime mortgages was being reported each night on the evening news. The senior executive leaders at Company A were trying to understand what, if any, impact the banking crisis would have on the United States manufacturing segment.

**Uncertainty.** I asked Sid to reflect on the time period leading up to the recession:

We were at a sales conference in Hawaii. We had started seeing a major decline in orders. And some of the orders that were still coming in were tentative. We knew it was going to be big. We felt excitement about the looming challenge. We knew something hard and complex was coming our way but we were ready to take it on.

Sid recalled that employees at every level in operations were concerned about what was going to happen. The employees were concerned about the company's future but also worried about themselves on a personal level because their job security was at risk. As information of the looming recession traveled across the ocean, employees at the remote locations became worried too. Sid reflected on that time:

The new challenge was global. People in Europe and Asia see recession differently because they have their own cultural perspective. That's an old learning but a new challenge. A crisis situation across three continents is a challenge.

I asked Sid what he did to address these challenges. Sid felt it was important to not make promises or paint a rosy picture. Sid and the leadership team suspected the pending recession

might be a different type of recession brought on, in part, by the subprime mortgage meltdown. The senior team asked themselves questions. If Americans cannot afford to pay their mortgages, can they afford to buy other things? And if Americans are not going to spend money, what are the implications for manufacturing companies? There were many questions being asked at the time, but there were no clear answers. Sid was compelled to be honest with his team about the fact that there were more questions than answers.

When I asked Sid what he did to address the uncertainty and stress among his global team, he indicated he spent his time focusing people on their work:

You had to know what to focus people on. Tell them how to improve our chances of survival and what to work on. This made it easier to challenge old paradigms because people were more perceptive to try new things. I used the challenges to direct the organization to improve. Instead of waiting and seeing what would happen, people used their open capacity to work on improving the organization. We hoped this would position us stronger when the recession was over. There was so much unknown. It was important that we keep working on things that would make our organization strong while we were waiting to see what was going to happen.

One of his colleagues, Sonya, shared her perspective on this time:

Sid is a calm person and he is a deep thinker. We were very nervous during this time. Especially at the beginning because we didn't know what this was about. We saw the news and we saw huge companies collapsing. He did not come across as too urgent, but it was clear he had thought things through. He was not afraid to move quickly. He was not afraid to try new things. Sid knew how to manage the challenges and make the tough

calls. He understood that he had to communicate to all of his employees, not just the employees in the United States.

Sonya also shared that Sid demonstrated patience and poise in the time leading up to the recession, and when the recession became a reality. While other senior leaders in the organization appeared panicked and nervous during the time of uncertainty, Sid carried himself with confidence, and this demeanor provided a sense of comfort to the employees. According to Sonya, “It gave people their own confidence and their own sense of calm so they were able to go back to their jobs and their teams and figure things out.”

Summer, one of Sid’s colleagues, also shared her perspective of his leadership during the time of uncertainty:

Sid gave us a sense of comfort and optimism for the future. He taught us the sky is not falling, and if we do the right things we will get through it. Most importantly, he provided guidance and visibility into the big picture. He provided a bridge to get us to the other side. We moved fast, but his team never doubted that we would all cross to the other side together.

Summer also recalled that Sid demonstrated good listening skills, “He took the time to talk with us and find out what was on our minds, and that was comforting to us.”

**Rigor.** As the feared recession turned into an actual recession, Sid became energized. I asked him to describe how he felt during that time:

I realized that I get energized in crisis situations. I get energized by bringing people together. I enjoy bringing people together. Sometimes I think people work better together when they are dealing with something really difficult. You do things differently

because you have to. And this new thinking can benefit an entire group of people. It also gives them hope.

When I asked Sid about the challenges he faced in bringing people together, he spoke about the importance of being rigorous. Sid discussed the importance of combining gut feelings with the data and numbers:

Some members of the executive team did not like to look at the numbers and the data.

They were more into concepts and words. The numbers bring you a sense of reality that keeps you grounded. You need to inject your thoughts into the numbers. Leaders need to be bothered with those details. The numbers are the ultimate judge and jury which tell you if your concepts you are discussing will bring you the profitability that you want.

Sid worked very hard to combine the rigor and reality of the situation with the work that had to be completed. It was not always clear what should be worked on; however, he listened to those in his organization for advice and combined that knowledge with data he was able to collect. This approach governed his decision making and work.

During my interview with Sid, he weaved the importance of rigor throughout multiple areas of our conversation. He believed that rigor is always important in business; however, it was critical during a recession because the consequences of making mistakes may be greater. He discussed the importance of rigor in his conversations with his employees and members of his organization:

You have to listen to your employees. You do not fully know and understand the implications of your decisions until you sit down with the people who have to implement those decisions, because you are always shaded by your bias. Do not sit in your office and hand out decisions. Talk to people in all areas of the business. Talk to those



employees who are in other countries. Bring that same rigor into your conversations with people. You need to value those discussions. I did not tell my people to pound sand. I asked them to be honest, and I took the information they gave me forward.

Sid is a person who values the relationships of those he works with. After we talked about the importance of listening to employees, he said, “I value the people I can count on.” He believed this thinking is even more important during a recession because there is greater urgency and increased risk. In a global organization such as Company A, he depended on his team to bring their perspectives forward in an effort to find solutions that would work for the entire company. He counted on their opinions, insights, and perspectives. The absence of those perspectives would potentially result in certain problems not being addressed in particular areas of the world.

He also discussed the importance of rigor given the global nature of the company. Sid believed working with rigor is of greater importance when a company has multiple locations across the world. Individuals who conduct business in multiple countries know there are different requirements for government, customers, and employees. For example, cost cutting initiatives, potentially resulting in headcount reductions, that could be implemented in the United States might not work in Germany, given the differences in employment laws. Throughout the recession, employees and leaders developed ideas which would work in certain countries but which would require different applications in other countries. In some cases, solutions appropriate for some countries would not work at all in other countries. Sid learned there was not one appropriate solution in any given area. As a result of these global complexities, Sid indicated rigor was especially important during these problem solving situations. In his opinion,

rigor included scenario planning which was intended to consider the implications of potential actions.

Summer and Sonya both spoke a great deal of Sid with regard to his rigor and listening skills:

Sid is a good listener and a good observer. Be candid, he will hear it. He will listen and he will take action. Sid had strong connections across the globe, and he listened to everyone. He seemed to enjoy hearing the ideas of other employees. He took everyone's concerns to heart. He listened intently and then combined the words he heard with rigorous analysis. His balance was great.

As Sid and I talked, his voice became excited as he recalled the times he worked with his team. His most treasured memories of his career are those times he had the opportunity to work closely with others. While the recession is a memory of extreme pain for some individuals, Sid found happiness during that period in part due to his close ties and deep work with others, "Your job is to be an enabler of the organization. People get really happy when they succeed through their own ability."

**Values and clarity.** Sid said, "I learned that events like a recession can bring out the worst in people." After over 20 years of experience, the global recession had brought about new leadership challenges for him. Perhaps the biggest of those challenges was the uncertainty and how other employees dealt with it. Employees and executives at Company A were uncertain, and at the time, that uncertainty resulted in fear and undesirable actions on the part of some people. Sid reflected on that time:

It became evident to me that some people will negotiate away their values if it means they will get more security. For example, a machine operator might not admit mistakes

because of fear. In some cases, executives might not share information I feel should be shared. Some people whom I considered to be good made really bad decisions that I felt were wrong. The crisis exposed the dark sides of people.

I asked Sid what he learned as a result of leading through the recession and dealing with all of the challenges. He spoke about the importance of knowing where you stand on your values, “You have to know what you are willing to risk. You have to know if you are willing to make the tough and honest decisions and let the chips fall where they may.” He spoke of examples when he felt leaders would not listen to ideas, perhaps because they were looking out for themselves instead of the organization. Sid indicated their egos—or maybe it was their insecurity—sometimes prevented them from accepting what was right, “Be firm on your values and don’t negotiate them away.”

In our final minutes together, Sid offered some insightful words. “When I die, I will not care about the money I have earned, I will care about the quality of my relationships.” He explained the true test of character is how you lead during difficult times. And he feels the great leaders have the ability and make it their priority to bring people together “to accomplish great things.”

At the end of my interviews with Summer and Sonya, I asked what they would say to Sid right now. Summer said, “I miss you Sid! Your leaving Company A was a huge loss for the company. You were the only leader who was brave enough.” Sonya shared, “There was a lot of laughing during the crisis. Sid and I laughed a great deal. His laughter helped me get through it. He helped me get through it.”

**Summary.** With the benefit of hindsight, Sid was at peace with his leadership during the global recession. The experience challenged his beliefs regarding how success and achievement

are defined. As a result of his experiences during the global recession, he found his work, when shared with others, was more meaningful than when he worked alone. As a leader today, Sid is more thoughtful and aware of others. He feels he is a better listener, and he understands the importance of being rigorous. Most importantly, he had even greater clarity regarding his values.

Triangulation confirmed that others agreed Sid was a successful leader during the global recession. The data indicated that Sid portrayed a deep connection to the organization and to its success as he led his teams. Using his values as a moral compass, he worked hard to guide his teams and create an open environment so the employees could work closely together and persevere. Those who worked closely with him counted on him to help them focus on what was important and prioritize what was most beneficial for the organization.

During the interviews, his employees often reflected on his contributions and wished other leaders at the company would have been more like Sid. They described the excitement he shared and the rigor with which he worked during the global recession. They described him as patient, rigorous, calm, and thoughtful. His colleagues affirmed that Sid is a leader who possesses strong values and that he demonstrated them every day in his work. Sonya and Summer both expressed gratitude for their good fortune to have had the opportunity to work with Sid. They indicated it was a positive and rich experience they will both carry with them for the rest of their lives.

### **Sophie, Director of Global Talent for Global Software Company (Company B)**

I interviewed Sophie at a coffee shop on a freezing cold December evening. It was just three short days before Christmas and holiday music was playing loud on the overhead speakers. I sat down with my gingerbread latte and anxiously waited for Sophie to arrive. She suddenly

flew through the door with a big smile on her face and a lot of energy. Even though she had recently started a new job and it was the end of a long work day, she was energetic and lively throughout our conversation. She talked freely and openly during the interview. Sophie has a relaxed style and laughs frequently. She has a witty sense of humor and told numerous jokes as she made funny facial expressions. Our time together was delightful.

Sophie graduated with a master's degree in organizational development and organizational psychology. She spent the majority of her career in senior level positions at global organizations. After numerous positions leading Human Resources and Organizational Development, Sophie spent two years as a consultant working with organizations on human resource policies and organizational development strategies.

At the time of the recession, Sophie was employed at Company B as the Director of Global Talent. Sophie had been employed at the company for 3 ½ years, and held this position during the entire time. This was a new position for the company, as they increased their focus to acquiring and managing talent on a global scale.

Company B is a global services and solutions company which serves customers in over 50 countries. They sell software products, which are a large investment for their customers. The company is proud of their tailored solutions, which are developed to meet the specific conditions and requirements of individual industries.

I asked Sophie to discuss the challenges the company was facing in the months leading up to the recession. Sophie shared that over the past decade the company had gone through a series of acquisitions, acquiring companies, and most recently, being acquired. In some cases, the recent acquisitions resulted in two locations in the same small town in Germany, for example. The multiple locations may have been more expensive than consolidating them into

one building. Previously, these costs had not been reviewed, but now consolidation of offices would need to be considered.

The company had a history of downsizing as an annual practice. This practice was continued in the months leading up to the recession. Sophie had hoped to help them think about this practice differently in the future. She felt they should have greater insight into their need for long-term employees instead of an annual purge seemingly fueled by what Sophie felt was an unwise philosophy, “Let’s get rid of them because we can no longer afford them.” Sophie felt they were constantly dealing with the consequences of their bad cost decisions, rather than planning and being pro-active before the decision was made. She explained that this annual exercise was actually more expensive in the long run as they were constantly reorganizing workloads and processing paperwork for hired and fired employees. She had hoped to help the company develop a plan to manage their short-term and long-term staffing plans based on the needs of the business.

Sophie described the environment as “uncertain” and “different” in the months leading up to the recession. The company began to see a delay in orders that had been previously regular. Customers who had previously committed to purchases were beginning to delay their decision. In some cases, the customers had initiated the order but had decided to not sign on the dotted line because they did not know what the future might hold. As a result of the delays in orders, the company began to look at the implications to their own organization. The senior team was trying to determine where their company fit into the customer’s business cycle. Sophie said, “If our customers delay decisions, we have to delay decisions, too.” The leadership team did not have an understanding of how long the delays would be or what the impact would be to their company. Sophie went on to explain that the implications of delaying decisions meant the

company would have to delay their own hiring and also reduce costs in their operating infrastructure.

**Flexible forecasting.** When I asked Sophie to tell me what it was like after they realized the economy was going into a recession, she talked about the initial activities they began to work on. She shared, “Initially there was a lot of budget cutting and cost reduction.” While she understood they had to do something to address the turmoil caused by the lack of orders and delays of orders, it was difficult to make decisions because there was so much uncertainty about what was really happening in the economy and how long it would actually last. More importantly, it was not clear how their organization would be impacted. She agreed the company needed to reduce costs and operate more efficiently, but at the same time she worried they were sacrificing their future by not funding the strategic activities, “Like anything strategic, you pay later if you do not invest today.” However, given the large decline in orders, the company was forced to face the reality that they would not achieve profit targets if they did not reduce costs by making changes in the infrastructure.

“We spent a lot of time re-forecasting and re-planning and re-forecasting some more.” At times the work seemed redundant, and it was unclear whether it was producing the intended result. While the re-forecasting was frustrating at times, she indicated the time they spent reflecting on their priorities was time well spent. Bringing people together to share their ideas helped ensure the organization was working on the right objectives.

**Adaptive innovation.** “Desperation is the mother of invention.” Sophie spoke these words with a mischievous smile. I was speechless as I reflected on what these words might have meant to her and to her organization. I anxiously awaited her response. She smiled and talked about the creativity she saw from the employees of the organization. As a result of the budget

and cost cutting initiatives, the employees were challenged to find a new way to work. She reflected on that time:

People became creative and resourceful. We had to focus on what we had to get done but we had to figure out a lower cost way to do it. The recession gave wings to some things that we will never take out of our culture in a good way. For example, I lost my travel money, but no one changed my objectives. We are a global organization, and I needed that money to fly to other countries. We disentangled the ends from the means. I had to figure out a new way to accomplish what I needed to accomplish.

Sophie elaborated on how they “disentangled the end from the means.” She shared an example where her team was in the process of creating learning strategies for the global organization. This objective initially involved a sizeable budget to fund the activities needed to roll out the global program. In part, the budgeted dollars were for travel costs that were needed to fly to the other countries. The money was removed from their budget; however, they still had to achieve the objective, “We constantly had to do more with less. Since money was no longer an available vehicle with which to solve problems and accomplish objectives, looking at problems from multiple angles became increasingly important during the recession.”

“The recession almost made the world seem smaller,” she said. Sophie and her team were responsible to roll out a global leadership program. The purpose of the program was to focus on global connectedness. It was important to the company that certain parts of the organization’s culture were present in all countries it operated in. When I spoke to her colleagues about this initiative, they spoke with great excitement. The challenge for their team was how to implement this program without the budget they had initially counted on. Sophie told her team, “You have to figure out a way to get that objective met without being in front of



the person physically.” She shared that her organization had to learn how to have remote meetings effectively, which included being intentional about the timing of meetings, agendas, and the cultural differences that would be present during the meeting. It became increasingly important to figure out how to keep people connected even though they were not physically present. Sophie reflected on the question she constantly asked herself, “How do you accomplish a goal with people who are sleeping when you are awake?” She feels it is easier to work and connect with someone when you walk by their office all day long. The reality of a global organization is you have to figure out how to work together on different time zones.

The recession was an unsettling and volatile time for Company B. When I asked Sophie how she handled this turmoil, she said that she believes values and communication are at the heart of organizations. She described one of her proudest accomplishments at Company B: she led an initiative to establish the definition of values. Prior to her arrival, the company did not have defined values, nor were values an active part of the workplace. Sophie and her team were leading an effort to create and define a value model for the global organization. In order to accomplish this goal, she and her team were hosting global focus groups to engage the organization in a values conversation. One of her peers, Sarah, reflected on her work:

Sophie’s greatest contribution was she understood the importance of creating a values model for our organization. We did not have declared values. The values work we did became the cornerstone of how we treated people.

During the times of uncertainty, some of Sophie’s co-workers advised and encouraged her to not complete the values initiative her team was working on. The recession had put a financial strain on the organization and most everyone at Company B was gravely distracted.

Sophie did not agree the values work should be delayed, and she proceeded forward. She reflected on why her values work was so important:

What is more important than values? You do not wait for the right time to talk about values. Maybe the bad times *are* the right times to talk about values. And to help people understand that there is something bigger here they are working on. That this is not just a job; it is something bigger and grander than that.

After her team defined the values and created a values framework for the organization, Sophie spent a significant portion of her time communicating the values. She shared that not only creating the values were important, but also communicating them to everyone during a difficult time. I asked her why values were so important to her. Sophie believed values were something the employees could hang on to during the recession, “It would have been easy to wallow in our grief about the current situation. But I wanted us to take this time to focus on really going forward.” Sophie used the values framework as a vehicle to help people to go forward. She felt values should govern the organization’s decision making and its daily actions, “If you don’t write down what you all believe, how do you know what you believe?” The lack of formality and cohesion around values had been, in part, contributing to the turmoil in the organization and making the recession even more challenging.

Co-workers commented on how well Sophie was able to help them during the times of uncertainty and able to help them in achieving their goals. In addition to helping them achieve their own goals, Sophie was able to help them deal with the uncertainties and changes that were happening in the broader organization as a result of the recession. Stella reflected:

During a very anxious time, a time with many uncertainties, Sophie was very proactive about change initiatives. She taught people how to handle the change for themselves and

also how to talk to others. She was very open and honest with us, and she gave us information. She also helped us get things done. She would figure out how to remove obstacles. And she took action when other managers did not.

When I met with Sophie's co-workers, they spoke about the impact Sophie made on their daily work because of her positive attitude. Business is hard on any given day; however, during the recession, the days were extremely difficult as employees were laid off, expenses were cut, and morale was at an all time low.

**Creative problem solving.** I asked Sophie to talk about what she learned as a result of the recession. She talked about problem solving. From her perspective, the recession helped us get back to the fundamentals. She felt this was an important reminder in an overly complicated and unpredictable global world. She reflected on her new approach to problem solving as a result of the recession:

I was reminded how important it is to turn the question upside down to figure out a different angle to look at it. So often you have your heart set on a solution and just when you get it figured out, you need to challenge yourself to see it from a different vantage point to come up with an even better solution.

The recession presented challenges that many workers currently in the workforce had not dealt with before. While some of the problems were complex, it was helpful to think about the fundamentals of problem solving and to think about different possible solutions for a particular problem.

One of her co-workers, Stella, reflected on her experience working with Sophie during this time:

Sophie has a unique ability to take abstract concepts and make them usable.

Organization Development ideas and concepts can sometimes be far reaching. Sophie has a talent to make it usable; she helps you make the concept usable so you can actually put it into action.

**Reframing space.** As a result of leading during the recession, Sophie sees a connection between the recession and space. Specifically, the experience of the recession caused Sophie to think about space completely differently. Jim Collins (2001) argued the importance of getting the right people on the bus. He explained, “If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we’ll figure out how to take it someplace great” (p. 41). As a result of the recession, Sophie was no longer focused on the importance of having people in the right seats. She became energized as we talked about potential changes to the Collins model post-recession. While she still believed the right people need to be on the bus, she has developed a new insight:

I took place totally out of it. Place is a way of thinking about things. Place is cheeks in seats. Now it’s about having the right people do the right thing at the right time. The right time is the key. It should be a greater focus on results. And maybe it’s virtual, maybe the cheeks are not physically in the seat, maybe they are in another country. Just do the right things to be successful at the right time.

Sophie was passionate about people and her convictions. Throughout the interview she spoke with strength and with passion. She has a clear idea that leaders need to bring out the best in their people. Sophie believes this is even more important and required during times of crisis and recession.

**Summary.** With the benefit of hindsight, Sophie believed she was a successful leader during the global recession. Sophie was guided by her values and taught the organization how to live by its values. The experience brought her closer to her employees and other members of the organization. She spoke of the closeness she felt to her teams as they worked through this difficult time.

Triangulation confirmed that others agreed Sophie was a successful leader during the global recession. The data indicated that Sophie is admired for her openness, dedication, perseverance, and listening skills. Her connections to the organization and to people were infectious to others as they worked through difficult decisions. Ultimately, Sophie's position was eliminated towards the end of the recession. Those who worked with her indicated this was a loss for the organization. Organizational development was a new department for the company pre-recession, and executives decided it was no longer an affordable necessity.

During the interviews, her employees spoke fondly of her contributions and indicated they hope to work with her again in the future. They described Sophie as a person who always has a plan and who knows how to do the right thing. They indicated her approach was exactly what the company needed during a turbulent time.

### **Simon, President of Operations for Beauty Industry Global Leader (Company C)**

I interviewed Simon on a cold and windy December afternoon. My initial contact with Simon was via email, and he showed genuine excitement and interest in my research. My initial impression was that Simon is someone who is passionate about his work and his people. I was excited to continue on my journey and have Simon participate.

Arriving too early for our scheduled interview, I had 30 minutes to spare. I spent the extra time relaxing on the oversized comfy leather furniture in the beautifully decorated lobby. I

was struck by the unique and beautiful art pieces and sculptures scattered throughout the lobby. I noticed a bench that appeared to be carved out of unique stone. I would later learn that the expensive art is an important element of the company's culture, and most everyone enjoys unique pieces of art in their offices and community meeting areas.

Company C is a global leader in the beauty industry. The company sells a wide range of beauty products and services in many parts of the world. The company had been in the newspapers recently due to disagreements among the Board of Directors and turmoil with investors. This type of company was particularly interesting for my research because their business is dependent on their customers' having disposal income. While certain high-end beauty products and salons that cater to the wealthy may not be severely impacted by a recession, a large portion of Company C's business is in the low- and medium-priced markets.

As I sat in the lobby waiting for our appointment, I was again struck by more beauty: the beautiful employees who passed by me. One after another, they walked by. They looked like they had stepped off the covers of glamorous fashion magazines, and the lobby seemed like a fashion show runway. Outfits were perfectly coordinated with purses, hats, scarves, and zebra-patterned tights. Even though the December weather was cold and windy, employees wore dresses, skirts, and short-sleeved shirts. However, they were paired in most cases with a fashionable winter coat.

Simon greeted me in the lobby with a warm smile and a firm handshake. He appeared as well-dressed and trendy as the employees I had just seen. As I followed Simon to his office, many people we passed along the way shared friendly exchanges with him. A couple of times, it seemed employees detoured from their planned walking path to say hello to him. He smiled

warmly to each person. I noticed he paused and made direct eye contact with everyone he encountered.

We settled into our interview quickly. Simon sat down in his well-decorated office and began to talk about himself. Throughout our time together he spoke clearly and confidently. He seemed to be a natural communicator, and words appeared to come easily to him. Simon described himself as “people driven.” He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and enjoys working with employees and customers. Employed at Company C for 22 years, he has been in his current role as President for five years. Simon oversees over 500 people and operations at hundreds of sites.

I asked Simon to share what it was like during the time leading up to the recession. He talked about the beliefs the senior leadership team held at the time.

We went into the recession believing that we were recession resistant. People need our services. We believed we were an affordable necessity and not a luxury. We believed our brands were broadly spaced across the value category.

Simon wanted to believe they were “recession resistant”; however, he had reservations. The company had previously raised prices on their lower-end products, which were targeted to lower income customers. He was internally conflicted and decided they had made matters worse as a result of the price increase. He advised the senior leaders to lower prices, but they did not listen, “In hindsight I would have pushed hard to hold prices. I think during difficult times you want your customers to feel that they are being charged a reasonable price.” With the benefit of hindsight, Simon realized he saw the world differently and wished he would have worked harder to convince others. It turns out Simon’s view of the world at the time was correct. If the

leadership team had seen the situation from Simon's vantage point, they might have made different decisions.

Simon recalled that there came a time when the senior leaders had different opinions about what was going on in the economy and in the company's specific market. Some of the senior executives believed their business was a replenishment business, providing such things as razors and razorblades. Intertwined in their thinking was the belief that their products and services were necessities, not luxury items. Other members on the senior team had an opposing view. They believed, according to Simon, "We were fooling ourselves." Simon explained that the executives believed the company was a service business and its services were a choice that consumers could make. Given the fact that Americans were beginning to lose their jobs and were struggling to stay in their homes, it seemed the business might need to be positioned differently. The positioning would be different depending on whether a person believed the company's products were a luxury or a necessity.

One of Simon's colleagues spoke of their company's image and approach to the recession:

You will see expensive art throughout the building. It is a part of our culture. And while it is nice to have, I think we need to rethink about our priorities from a business perspective. I don't think the senior team had agreement about the current state, and as a result, they either took the wrong action or no action.

Simon became more worried when he saw customer visitation patterns weaken over a few months, "We were given the direction to offset the erosion of customer visits by raising prices." Again, Simon felt they were making matters worse. With the benefit of hindsight, customer visits were down, in part, because customers were probably using their services less



frequently in an effort to spend less money during an uncertain economy. While Simon believed the company was well positioned, it seemed they were not focusing on the right initiatives. To him, raising prices felt like a misguided action during difficult financial time. His opinion was they were losing sight of their position compared to their competitors. He felt the price increases would drive their customers to choose alternatives. In addition, the lack of cohesion at the senior level regarding how to weather the storm was creating additional frustration and confusion.

Simon's colleague, Sasha, has worked with him for many years. I asked Sasha to describe what it was like to work for Simon at the beginning of the global recession. She shared her feelings:

We had a mass exit of leadership at the company. We knew the company was not where it needed to be. Simon knows the business and I think he knew the direction we were going was not the right one. He did his best to influence; however, he is only one person and there was a great deal of turmoil at the top. I am not sure anyone was listening to him. But he knew what to do. He knew the right things to do but was not always able to convince those above him. It was something he had to deal with every day.

**Focus on customers.** Feeling frustration regarding the lack of alignment at the senior level, Simon began to focus on the customers. When I asked Simon how he spent the majority of his time, he spoke about their customers and the importance of making them the company's top priority:

I started focusing on our customer relationship and our employees who serve the customer. I started by thinking about how we can take people who tend to make slightly more than minimum wage and convince them that we need to provide a better customer experience. And if we do this, over time, our customers will keep coming back to us.

Simon explained that in their business, customers have a lot of different choices. Beauty services and products are competitive and offered through many different channels. For example, high-end beauty products are now sold at value grocery chains and discount retailers. Simon believed that providing a “great experience” was the way to influence their customers to be “less promiscuous” in terms of their choices. He was passionate and demonstrated conviction as he explained, “If a customer has a great experience with us, then a \$2.00 coupon with a competitor will not mean as much.”

He shared that he felt really lucky to work with so many talented individuals who were completely focused on and committed to the customer. He was specifically referring to his team for his particular division:

My team is committed to the company, to the brand, and to each other. I have people who are really passionate about what we do here. I feel really good about the fact that I had a really great team and that I continued to develop that team even when times were hard. Of course, I could have done some things differently. But to me, it’s about working together and saying, “We are going to get through this. We will get through it together. Let’s be positive. Let’s focus on the things that we can impact and the things that we can make happen. If we keep doing the right stuff, we will get through the storm.”

His employee, Sasha, spoke of what it was like to work for Simon during the global recession. She shared her thoughts:

People can relate to Simon. During a recession people can lose faith. Simon will share good news and bad news. People will follow him and they will do it with a smile on their face. We ask a lot of our teams; he is in touch with them. People are behind him because he has such a big sense of ownership.

I asked his employee, Susan, to talk about his leadership during the global recession. She said:

Simon is a great communicator. He tells us what is going on, and he keeps us updated. He takes initiative and does not just sit around and wait for things. He works hard with us, and in return we work hard for him. He wants things to be smart and make sense. I like working for someone who is smart and reasonable. He did not ask us to do things that he wasn't already doing himself.

The price increases the company made at the beginning of the recession still weigh on Simon's mind today. During our interview, he brought it up numerous times, over and over at different points in the conversation. At one point he looked down and said, "Maybe we should have lowered our prices because times were tough. It would have been the right thing to do for the Wal-Mart customer." He explained that while such an approach would have decreased revenues in the short term, the company probably would have received additional customers as a result, and more importantly, lifelong loyalty from existing ones.

**Find a balance.** I asked Simon what he thought distinguished him from other leaders during the global recession. He spoke of the difficulty of being a public company, especially during a recession, "It makes is difficult because it's all about generating earnings." While he recognizes the importance of generating profit, he proclaims himself to be a "long-term player." Focusing on doing the right things for the long-term is difficult when Wall Street is focused on the short term and demands quarterly earnings. He feels something that distinguished him from other leaders during the recession was his ability to stay focused on those employees in the organization who directly serve the customer. He shared that some leaders in the company were slashing payroll too deeply. In addition, some members of the leadership team wanted to change

the compensation structure in an effort to reduce costs. Simon felt changing the compensation for employees who make only slightly more than minimum wage would be de-motivating and demoralizing for the employees. He did not want those employees closest to their customers to have a decrease in pay when the economy was becoming difficult. He explained further:

I tried to find ways to create shareholder value and still remember who your customer is. And most importantly, I tried to remember who served our customers.

It was important to Simon that those employees who were closest to the customer were treated well. He believed that the employees who serve the customer know how to do it and are passionate about doing it. Susan shared that one of Simon's greatest strengths is his ability to connect and form relationships with employees out in the field:

People respect him. He has been at the company for many years, and he has a great deal of experience. He knows what works and he is willing to try new things with people. But most importantly, he is an advocate for the field.

I asked Sasha to share her final reflections of Simon's leadership during the global recession. She shared:

He connected the dots for us. He has such a broad picture of the organization, and he knows the other division as well as he knows our own. His greatest contribution is his ability to get other people to follow him. He just has a way with words; people wanted to follow him. People trusted him at a time when it was difficult to trust anyone.

**Learn and adapt.** I asked Simon to talk about what he learned as a result of leading through the global recession. He shared his insights:

I learned that I have a lot to learn. Anyone can pilot a ship in calm seas. Our seas were not even rocking that much. We were still making money and hitting some of our targets.

I think it's important to keep learning and know that you always have more to learn. And just when I was really good at running something a certain way, things changed and I had to run things a different way. And learn what that new way is. The things that kept me up at night were not that important in the grand scheme of things. If you can just release the old stuff, then maybe you can see solutions that you weren't able to see in the past. And good solutions, not things like taking Christmas away.

He reminded me to always remember the customer, "Think about things from their perspective. They are why we exist."

**Summary.** With the benefit of hindsight, Simon gave himself an "above average" rating for his leadership during the global recession. He feels he is close to employees. He demonstrated a deep commitment to the organization and to its customers. While there are some things he would have done differently, he is at peace with his leadership and feels he did the best he could. He indicated he has learned from the experience and will take his lessons forward with him.

Triangulation confirmed that others agreed Simon was a successful leader during the global recession. He is perceived as personable and as an advocate for the employees who work in the field and are not in the corporate office on a daily basis. The data indicated that Simon has a deep understanding of the business and the customers who buy their products and services. Throughout the interviews, his colleagues indicated they look to him for leadership, and they trust him. During the global recession, his colleagues witnessed a divided leadership team and felt Simon always tried to do what was right for the company. While at times they wished his ideas would have been implemented, his colleagues agreed he is a successful leader and hope to work with him for many more years.

## **Samantha, Vice President of Operations for Beauty Industry Global Leader**

Like Simon, Samantha is employed by Company C, a global leader in the beauty industry. The company had been in the newspapers recently due to disagreements among the Board of Directors. The company was particularly interesting for my research because their business is dependent on customers' having disposal income. While certain high-end beauty products and salons that cater to the wealthy may not be severely impacted by a recession, a large portion of Company C's business is in the low- and medium-priced markets.

I interviewed Samantha in her office on a cold and sunny December afternoon. It was just a few days before Christmas, and her office building and hallways were cheerfully decorated for the holidays. As she walked me to her office, she was friendly and chatted excitedly about her new puppy. My first impression of Samantha was that she is friendly, approachable, and easy to talk to.

As we sat down to begin our interview, Samantha suddenly seemed nervous. I did my best to put her at ease. I was aware of my body language, and I assured her our discussion would be casual and comfortable. She offered that the environment at Company C was a stressful one and that she had had a busy day.

Samantha graduated with a master's degree in finance. Employed at Company C for 12 years, she has been in her current role as Vice President for 11 years. In her role, Samantha oversees over 500 people and operations at hundreds of sites. She explained that she spends the majority of her time out of the office with her employees in the field.

She recalled the time period leading up to the recession. The recession was only two years ago, yet she felt it seemed like a very long time ago. She recalled, "I felt a little different, but not a lot different. The recession was in the media, but it didn't feel like it was related to our

company; it was just the banking crisis.” I asked Samantha how she spent her time during the recession, and she shared that she was focused on recruiting and education. She recalled that the environment was busy and tense, but she focused her time making sure her field employees were happy.

One of her responsibilities is to grow the revenue, and ultimately the profit, for her region. This task proved a challenge to her during the recession. She was seeing signs that the number of customer visits was down and that revenue growth was not achieving the desired results. As mentioned in the previous case study, the company had implemented a price increase which presented further challenges in an already struggling economy. Samantha described that this time was especially difficult as employee morale declined because the departments could not achieve their desired financial results.

Samantha reflected on that time:

I worked hard to make sure my stylists were happy. They are out there every day working hard with customers who can be difficult. And they make only a little more than minimum wage. They are the heart and soul of our company. And I work really hard to listen to them and help them with their challenges. It was difficult for them when customer visits were down. We were all asking what was going on, and it was hard to find answers.

**Communication.** From her perspective, communication was her greatest leadership contribution during the recession. She believes one of the most important aspects of her role is to communicate the company’s vision and goals to her teams out in the field. As she spoke, it was evident to me that she takes this role seriously. She explained that employees in the field can frequently become disconnected and misaligned due to distance. Her teams are located all

across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Samantha indicated it is important to her that her employees feel a connection to the company. I asked what she did to accomplish this during the recession. She shared additional perspectives:

I communicate the company's vision and goals out to my team. I give feedback about what I see and communicate back to the corporate office. I am on the road and I see what is happening out in the stores. I act as a liaison. We have to listen to our people because they are the closest to the customer. We have to communicate why things will or will not work.

Samantha said that when they saw a decline in their numbers, it was not clear what was driving the numbers. By talking with the employees in the field, she was able to collect information that gave insight so management could make connections. She discussed examples in which the corporate office wanted to implement certain initiatives, but they did not ask anyone out in the field if these ideas would work. Samantha worked hard to bring the remote and global employees into the conversation. Her colleague, Spencer, shared his insights on her communication and overall leadership style:

Samantha is very positive. She is a great communicator. She asks the right questions of people. She doesn't let people off the hook, and she has the ability to ask about facts without accusing or judging. She listens extremely well and that is an important piece of communication. When she talks, it is evident she wants to do what is right for the organization and employees, and most of all, our customers. Given the global nature of her role, she feels it is imperative to remind Americans that initiatives that work in the United States may or may not work in other countries.



Her colleague, Shannon, also provided reflections on Samantha's leadership during this time:

She leads from behind the scenes. She contributes more than anyone realizes but she does it in a non-showy way. For whatever reason, she never gets in front, but we can see her contributions on a daily basis. When others were struggling with their numbers, Samantha was not. Her global regions consistently are the highest performing, yet Samantha is the least visible leader. And when I say least visible I don't mean she is hiding, I mean there is a subtle nature about her. And it really looks good on her, and it works for her.

**Achievement.** When I asked Samantha to reflect on what she learned as a result of the recession she said, "I learned that you can do more than you think you can do." She shared stories of work that never seemed to end. There were days when she did not think she could accomplish everything that needed to be completed. She had many management meetings to attend. Her participation was required on numerous teams. And most importantly, she needed to spend her time out of the office with her field employees. She reflected on that time:

You can always do more. There is more in you. And when people put their faith in you, you will rise to the occasion. You literally feel like you can't do any anything more and then you overcome it. We had to figure out ways to cut costs and do the right things so the organization could be successful. But I learned that I could deal with the difficult challenges.

Her colleague, Shannon, also shared her perspectives regarding Samantha's leadership during the global recession:

Samantha is very reliable and she meets her commitments. She never lets anyone down. She was a constant during the turbulent times. She acts the same under stress as she does on a typical day. And everyone feels that she is there to talk to. She always made the time to talk and to listen.

I asked Samantha what she did to address the challenge of not being able to get everything accomplished. She spoke of the importance of constantly reevaluating her priorities. She said, "I found time for the most important things." She described the demands that were placed on her. Given that her organization is comprised of over 500 employees, on any given day she has hundreds of emails, voice mails, and situations that need to be handled. While she laughed and said, "I love my job," she admitted that at times proper prioritization was the key to success, especially during the recession. Sometimes she felt bad because she could not accomplish everything she needed to, "I had to learn to feel good about what I do get done." She indicated she had a strong desire to help the organization succeed. When times were difficult, her level of commitment grew stronger.

**Summary.** With the benefit of hindsight, Samantha believed she was a successful leader during the global recession. While at times she appeared uncomfortable talking about herself, she indicated she is proud of her results and happy for the closeness she has with her team. She shared that as a result of the global recession, they are closer today than previously, and she attributes that intimacy to the turbulent uncertainty they were forced to live through. She performed to the best of her ability and leaned on her colleagues to carry some of the weight.

The data supported her commitment to the organization and to its customers. Triangulation confirmed that others agreed that Samantha was a successful leader during the global recession. She is perceived as a strong leader who possesses a humble and controlled

nature. Her colleagues see her as thoughtful and modest. Throughout the interviews, her colleagues indicated they valued Samantha's leadership and insights. They indicated her ability to accomplish required tasks and her communication were great assets during the difficult and uncertain times.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

The analysis across all cases presents the quintain (Stake, 2006). The quintain, as described by Stake, is an object or phenomenon or condition to be studied and understood. In this collective case study, the phenomenon studied was the leadership practices and processes that were used during the global recession and the knowledge gained by of each of the leaders.

Using qualitative research methods, I analyzed the data from the four cases that were studied in order to identify themes that emerged. In a multiple case study, "there are two stages of analysis—the *within case analysis* and the *cross-case analysis* (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). For stage 1, the within case analysis, I treated each case as a "comprehensive case in and of itself" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194) and gathered data to analyze each single case. Each case was written with a narrative with supporting quotes by the participants. The data was triangulated through participant interviews with those individuals who were best positioned to witness the individual cases. These participants were peers, colleagues, direct reports, and superiors. As a result of this analysis, themes for each case emerged. I validated these findings through member checks from the participants. For stage 2, the cross-case analysis, I reviewed each case within the context of all cases to find themes and patterns across all the cases. I attempted "to build a general explanation that fit each of the individual cases, even those the cases varied in their details" (Yin, 1994, p. 122).

The first theme gives insight into how the leaders felt during the time period leading up to the recession, during the early days once the recession became a reality to them, and throughout the remainder of the recession. The second theme highlights the specific actions that were taken by the leaders during the recession. The third theme illustrates the connection the leaders felt to their organizations and also their internal drives. The fourth theme illustrates the camaraderie and closeness that existed between the leaders and their teams. Subthemes emerged within each of the major themes, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Themes and Subthemes*

Theme 1. Dealing with looming uncertainty	Theme 2. Focusing on what is important	Theme. 3 Connection to organization	Theme 4. We are all in this together
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The environment felt different</li> <li>• Facing reality</li> <li>• Planning and prioritizing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing costs</li> <li>• Focusing on the customer</li> <li>• Accomplishing goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passion for success</li> <li>• Commitment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using values as a guide</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>

**Theme 1. Dealing with Looming Uncertainty**

The participants in this study were not new to leadership roles. They had all previously held roles, director level or higher, for a minimum of seven years. A common theme shared by all of the participants in this study was that they all had to deal with a looming uncertainty during the time leading up to the recession and in the early days once the recession was a reality. While

they all expressed the feeling that they could handle most leadership challenges presented to them, the dynamics of leadership during this time of uncertainty was different. The level of uncertainty was higher than it had been previously in their careers. The uncertainty, in many cases, resulted in fear and panic in them, in other leaders, and in the member of their teams. Three subthemes emerged related to dealing with the looming uncertainty: a different feeling in the environment, facing reality, and planning and prioritizing.

**The environment felt different.** The data from all cases revealed that the participants in this study were all faced with a dramatically changing environment. Their work days, which used to be filled with a certain type of normalcy, were now filled with numerous levels of uncertainty. Customers were cancelling orders on a daily basis. The companies, in all cases, were beginning to see large decreases in revenue. The banking crisis and meltdown of subprime mortgages dominated the news every day. The nightly news was reporting that Americans were losing their homes at record rates. Employees and customers were hearing these reports and bringing the information to work with them. In all cases, the participants wondered how these dynamics would affect their organizations and were not sure what conclusions, if any, needed to be drawn. This new environment tested their leadership abilities in ways that were not consistent with their previous experiences. Almost every day brought with it a set of new challenges that needed to be considered, processed, or dealt with. While the executive leaders were working through these challenges, they had limited visibility into the future and a restricted view of the broader picture.

The following quote demonstrates the mood of the environment the participants were feeling:

It was like walking a tightrope. People lose confidence if the tightrope is not managed or if you fall off. We didn't know if there was a net or not.

I chose this quote because it reflects how the executive leaders were feeling. The analogy of the tightrope without a net provides insight into their fears about the consequences of making mistakes or misguiding their organizations. I think this quote captures how different the new environment felt to them and to their organizations.

**Facing reality.** A second subtheme that emerged was that the participants were faced with the need to find a way to face the reality of the situation. Confronting the brutal facts of their current reality became necessary in order to lead their organizations and groups. In all cases, the participants spoke about the fears they felt because they did not understand the impact the recession would have on their organizations. In addition to feeling their own fears and uncertainties, they had to face the challenges of decreased orders from customers and nervous employees. They also had to deal with customer fears and employee fears.

This finding was, in part, connected to the different feel of the environment. As the participants discussed facing a new normal, they realized that part of accepting the new reality was the understanding and also acknowledging that they did not have all the answers. While this approach made them feel vulnerable at times, they received feedback from employees indicating that they appreciated the honesty.

The following quote is an example of one participant's thoughts regarding facing the changing reality:

You have to face reality. It's that simple. And be open to the fact that your reality will change. Listen. Observe. Never lose touch with reality. Your organization is depending

on you to stay in touch. And use your employees and customers and external sources to hear their view of reality. And then listen.

I chose this quote because of the conviction with which the participant spoke. The nature of changing reality was woven through all four of the cases. In all cases, the leaders shared that given the global nature of their companies, it was important to recognize that realities were perceived differently depending on an individual's culture. Different cultures did not always share the same understanding of a current interpretation of a particular reality. All four of the participants shared the importance of applying a cultural lens when solving problems or dealing with business issues that came up on a daily basis. They described the need to think globally, but act locally. While the leaders were addressing issues on a global scale, each of them indicated it was important to understand how the issue or potential solution would play out on the local level. The understanding that one fix would not work for all countries was required and the thinking needed to stay at the forefront of their minds. While they admitted this was not new thinking given the natures of their global organizations, the participants indicated that during the global recession its importance was elevated.

**Planning and prioritizing.** The third subtheme that emerged was the importance of planning and prioritizing. In some cases, it was clear to the leaders what they needed to do. At other times, they did not have any idea what they should do next. In spite of the lack of clarity, the participants all indicated the importance of having a plan. They acknowledged that although the plan evolved and constantly changed, it assisted them in dealing with the challenges. The following quote is an example of one participant's thoughts regarding the importance of creating a plan:

It was difficult to know what to focus on because it was overwhelming at times. But I quickly learned that I needed to develop a plan to keep the employees aligned and focused. Even though the plan changed a million times, it was helpful to know the priority and modify as we went along. An additional benefit of having a plan was the dialogue that we had when we developed it. It helped me understand what was on the minds of my employees.

As part of the planning process, the participants indicated the importance of reprioritizing. They did not accomplish this task in isolation; they worked with their teams. They indicated that they relied on their employees to bring their perspectives forward. After lively and sometime difficult discussions, they were able to walk away from the planning table with a set of priorities that made sense and would help drive the intended results.

One participant provided additional insight:

The more you are prepared, the better decisions you will make. You can't make decisions when you are in the fire. You have to prepare. And it's important to include your organization in the planning because they are critical to the execution of the plan. Your bandwidth is widened when you include your team. I believe they want to be a part of the solution. And hopefully they will tell you if your ideas are crazy. They are close to what is going on, and leaders need their employees to provide them an important reality check.

All of the participants highlighted the importance of planning and working with others throughout the planning process. While the future was unknown, the plan helped ground them as they ventured forward. The plan served as an important vehicle to focus the organization on what was the most important at that time. Triangulation supported that having a plan, although



it changed, provided an anchor which grounded the leaders and their employees to focus on what needed to be accomplished.

## **Theme 2: Focusing on What Was Important**

The second major theme that emerged was the criticality of focusing on what was important. Leading during the global recession was a new experience for all the participants. While they each had many years of management and global leadership experience, the dynamics around the most recent global recession presented an environment that was different than previous ones. The high degree of uncertainty made it difficult to prioritize; however, the participants each talked about focusing on the most important aspects to get them through the troubled and difficult time.

Three subthemes emerged related to focusing on what was important: reducing costs, focusing on the customer, and accomplishing goals.

**Reducing costs.** The first subtheme that emerged was the importance of reducing costs. Two of the leaders were forced to reduce their employee headcount by more than 20%. Three of the leaders discussed reductions in meeting expense and other discretionary spending in excess of 15%. In one case, the leader explained her organization was exploring combining facilities in an effort to save real estate costs. All four leaders experienced large decreases to their travel budgets. In two cases, the travel budgets were completely eliminated. While the data showed similarities and differences in particular areas where costs were actually reduced, all participants discussed that major and impactful cost reductions were made at their organizations during the recession. There came a point for each of the leaders when they decided they would be required to reduce operating costs, and in many cases reduce headcount. They discussed the pain and discomfort they felt regarding these required and necessary actions. Without exception, the

participants had close relationship with their employees and were experiencing internal conflict at the thought of having to let people go. At the same time, they recognized it was necessary for the greater good of the organization.

One of the participants spoke of the importance of bringing other employees into the conversation when looking at ways to reduce costs:

You need full engagement when you are looking at ways to reduce costs. For example, instead of telling my production manager to lay off 25 people, I shared with him the fact that we needed to reduce costs by 10%. I asked him for ideas on how we could accomplish that. And then we would talk about the pros and cons of each idea. This process gave him a say in the plan. And once the plan was decided, it was a lot easier for me to execute it because one of my key employees was fully bought in because he participated in it. This process was golden for us.

The data showed that each participant in this study chose different areas to reduce costs. What the participants shared in common was an overall concern for their employees and their well being. Even though they agreed it was important to reduce costs, they knew they had to make tough decisions which would result in letting people go. Three of the participants supported bringing members of their teams into the process to help them decide which costs should be cut, and one participant made most of the decisions in isolation. All participants had to find their own unique way to accomplish the difficult task. Triangulation supported that those leaders who brought in their teams to participate in the cost reductions had greater support and alignment.

**Focusing on the customer.** The second subtheme that emerged relates to the customer. All participants took actions during the global recession to take care of their customers. In one

case, the participant spent time trying to understand the recession from the customer's viewpoint in an effort to see if there was an opportunity to capitalize. In another instance, the participant went to great lengths to communicate with customers on a more frequent basis to understand their needs. In another example, the participant described that the organization had excess open capacity due to the decrease in business. The organization used the open capacity to focus on improving their existing products and trying to create new products. The thinking was if they used this time to improve products and services, maybe they would come out stronger when the recession was over, "Instead of trying to raise profits during a recession, maybe you take your lumps and focus on the customer. And you will come out better on the other side". The participants spoke with passion when they talked about their customers. They worried about their customers' needs and how they would meet them when they were so internally focused on surviving.

The participants in this study were, without exception, employed at global organizations. Though the dialogues, the leaders explained that customers were impacted in different ways and at different times. For example, the United States customers demonstrated changes in their buying patterns early on in the recession. Customers in Tokyo and China did not change buying patterns until six months into the recession. The causes of buying delays for each customer were different, and each leader had to work with their organizations to find ways to get more intimate with their customers during this time. One participant shared:

It's easy to treat your customers well when they are buying your products and giving you money. But how do you treat them when they don't have money to spend right now?

That is how you keep customers long term. It's easy to treat people well and everyone

gets along during the good times. But how do you work together during the bad times when no one is writing checks?

**Accomplishing goals.** The third subtheme that emerged was that the participants quickly began to focus on accomplishing specific and defined goals. When the leaders in this study realized the country was going to be in a recession, they decided they needed to focus on initiatives that would have a positive impact on their organizations. The data in this study did not show commonalities regarding the particular goals they chose to work on or the process by which they decided on goals. The theme that emerged, in all cases, was a drive and conviction to work on objectives which would help position their companies most strongly after the recession ended. There were numerous variables which could not be controlled, such as the meltdown of the mortgages and customer buying behavior. They became focused on the areas they could control: improving products, structuring leaner and more effective organizations, and staying the course on work that was already in progress. In one case, the company's "not-to-do" list became as important as its "to do" list.

One of the participants shared his approach to accomplishing goals:

We started to look at the way our service team was servicing customers. Did we have the right size organization? Did we work on the right things? We took this time to work on what we needed to work on to get better. And ignore all the distractions. At the end of each week I saw some things go well, and I saw some things that were weeds. I got energy from working on the right things, and that energy helped me stop the other stuff. At the end of the day, each group had to work on the right stuff. And we can be intentional about what those goals should be.

Accomplishing goals in global organizations can be challenging on any given day, due to the geography of where employees are physically positioned. The participants agreed that accomplishing defined and agreed-upon goals was increasingly difficult during the recession. They recognized that they needed to stay close to their teams and their peers to work together to identify and execute the initiatives that would best position the company for success.

### **Theme 3: Connection to Organization**

The third major theme that emerged is associated with the executive leader's connection to the organization. Based on the evidence of this study, all four of the participants were motivated in part to act during the recession, by their strong underlying desire to achieve success for their organizations. Each participant possessed a relentless desire to achieve the organization's mission or purpose, and also to serve their customers. While the participants discussed their personal goals and satisfactions, the majority of their time at work during the recession was spent aligning their thoughts and teams around how they could make the organization successful. Two of the participants had long-term relationships with their organizations. This longevity was partially attributable to the alignment of values between the organization and the leader. The consistency of values was a contributing factor to the leader's connection to the company. Two subthemes emerged related to connection to the organization: passion for success and commitment.

**Passion for success.** The first subtheme that emerged was that the leaders possessed an unwavering passion to succeed. The data showed, in all cases, that this passion was relentless. Coupled with deep connections to the organizations, all participants demonstrated strong passions for the success of their teams and their respective companies. Each of the participants clearly articulated how their daily actions connected to the organization's bigger purpose. They

were passionate about achieving the purpose and being successful. Their pursuit of this passion drove their thinking and daily actions during the recession. In some cases, the leader was out in front driving the actions or initiatives. In one case, a leader preferred to lead from behind the scenes, “Take the sideline role. Guide them and cheer for them from the sides. Share your passion with your team.”

The participants talked about the importance of knowing their roles as leaders during troubled times. At times, they needed to be in front making decisions; sometimes their role was head cheerleader. Other times they were a counselor; sometimes they were a boxer who needed to get into the ring and fight for what is right. Whatever role they played, they did it with passion. The leaders put their hearts and souls into everything they touched during the recession. Failure was not an option, only success. They were driven to keep getting better, regardless of how bad the situation may have seemed on the surface.

After the layoffs at their organizations, the employee morale and employee engagement was at an all-time low. As a result of low engagement, productivity declined. The participants shared that passion was what kept them going during this time. Their work and dedication was driven by their underlying passion to achieve success for their organizations, customers, and employees. Their passion helped them to dig deep within themselves and find the energy and motivation to keep moving forward. It was their passion for pursuit of the common good and the greater good that helped them to get up each morning and face the new challenges in the day ahead.

**Commitment.** The second subtheme that emerged from the data was the unwavering commitment of the participants to lead their teams through the recession. In addition, they were

committed to leading their organizations because they felt a connection between their personal values and the values of the organization. This commitment was just simply a part of them.

Throughout the recession, the participants shared that employees were laid off and budgets were slashed. As the surviving employees were left to deal with their losses of co-workers and budgets, they seemed, at times, to have lost their sense of meaning at work. They became disengaged and struggled to connect their work with the bigger picture of what the organization was trying to accomplish. From a leadership perspective, this was difficult for the participants to manage. They had their own fears they were facing; however, they had to find something from deep within themselves to lead their organizations through this turbulent time. The data analysis showed that one of the reasons they were able to persevere is because they never lost their level of commitment to the organization and to their teams.

One participant said, “It has been said that commitment ignites action, and I believe that!” At the heart of commitment is the belief that what you are doing matters and makes a difference in the world. Some of the participants reflected that their employees’ levels of commitment were challenged the most during the recession. The surviving employees felt a sense of guilt for keeping their jobs and were mourning the way things used to be. It was hard for them to think about the future when they had lost so much of the past. The participants spoke of their own personal unwavering commitment which they used to fuel and “ignite action.” Through leading by example, they were able to assist in igniting the flames within the hearts of their employees. They spent time talking to employees and reminding them of the bigger picture. It was important to the participants to use their high commitment levels to inspire their organizations.

#### **Theme 4: We Are in This Together**

The fourth major theme that emerged illustrates the camaraderie and closeness that existed between the leaders and their teams. The employees and executive leaders who participated in this study had multiple motivations for their work and actions during the recession; however, a feeling of closeness and togetherness was at the core. The executive leaders possessed a strong drive to work together with their employees and not let employees down or disappoint other executives by not meeting the required expectations.

During the recession, the leaders were required to make numerous decisions regarding priorities and tasks that needed to be accomplished. While they agreed they had many tasks to complete and the *what* was important, they felt that during the recession that the *how* was equally important. In fact, given the sensitive nature of the employees, at times the *how* was more important.

The participants were not leading through a typical time. The employees and organizations were deeply affected by hundreds of layoffs, deep declines in orders from customers, and low morale. These dynamics caused sensitivity throughout the organizations and in the minds of the employees. As a result, the leaders and employees became a tight knit group, and they wanted to get through the crisis together. The leaders shared that they took care of each other. They were genuinely interested in working together and supporting and caring for one another. Two subthemes emerged related to the fourth theme: using values as a guide and communication.

**Using values as a guide.** The data showed that the values of the executive leaders played a major role for them during the recession. Given the uncertainty of customers' orders and the turbulent economy, the participants of this study clung to their values and beliefs when



times were extremely hard for them. The organizations in this study were not achieving their desired financial results and as a result, cut large portions of their actual spending and planned spending. The leaders were not feeling successful from a business perspective; therefore, values became an important means with which to achieve fulfillment. For example, one company had strong values around teamwork. One leader reflected that they were able to accomplish teamwork on internal projects even though they were not achieving their forecasted financial results. The leader used these smaller wins to motivate his teams and help them feel that they were contributing to the greater good.

While there was not commonality among the particular values, the notion of clinging on to values during hard times was consistent in the data. The data showed this phenomenon was especially true in the area of decision making. The recession presented challenges for publically-held companies to meet their financial obligations. As a result, the leaders were put in a position to face tough challenges and make complicated decisions. The participants in this study used their values and beliefs as a foundation to make the tough calls. For example, one leader discussed the decision to lay off hundreds of employees. Another leader talked about massive budget cuts. They shared that they used their values as the guide to help them decide which way to proceed or which decision to make. They discussed that the decisions they made at that time were impacting many people's lives. One leader shared that he wanted to be able to sleep at night knowing that there was a reason and a logical approach for the decisions he was making. He did not want to be careless with the future of the organization or with the livelihood of his employees. While they reflected that not all executive leaders in their organizations were aligned with this approach, it was important to them.

**Communication.** The second subtheme that emerged was communication. The data showed that good communication was an essential ingredient in weathering the economic storm.

During the recession, the participants of this study faced turbulent problems such as decreased financial performance and employees who were not engaged. In all cases, they used open and honest communication to gain understanding to help avoid misunderstandings. Employees were taking in information on a daily basis from multiple sources: the nightly news, other companies, friends, relatives, and from employees and executives within their organizations. With this many information channels, it became difficult for the leaders to sort it all out and make sense of it. The participants of this study shared the importance of taking the time to have meaningful dialogues with their employees to convey important information and generate understanding. This time also gave the employees an opportunity to seek clarification and ask other questions that were on their minds.

Given the global nature of the organizations in this study, the executive leaders had to become creative about how to maintain communication with their global teams. One leader shared that emails became a poor choice because the tone of communications were often misconstrued. He shared that he had nightly phone calls with his global teams during a particularly difficult period. He reflected on that time:

The thing was we had reduced our work force by 20%! We didn't have time for miscommunication! I felt it was my job to make sure my employees understand my take on things so they could do their jobs. It's human nature, if you don't communicate, they will make stuff up. And the stuff they make up is usually wrong. So take the time. Our employees were scared and they were working their butts off. Communication was critical.

One participant discussed how communication was forced to change during the recession. For example, before the recession, he might have had a meeting once per week on the phone. During the recession, the frequency of the meetings was increased and video conferences became required. The video conference enabled the leader to see employees' faces and reactions as news was shared. This visual connection was important due to the difficulty of the issues they were discussing. One leader shared a perspective:

I bet there was a high spike in communication pre- and post-recession. We had to get good at communicating by using different devices: WebEx, video conferencing, Facetime. These might not have been inspired as quickly had it not been for the recession.

Information traveled quickly during the recession. Leaders wanted to stay on top of any rumors or misinterpretations. While they agreed that communication is always important and should always be a priority, each of them discussed the increased criticality of communication during the recession.

**Summary.** The first theme gives insight into how the leaders felt during the time period leading up to the recession, during the early days once the recession became a reality to them, and throughout the remainder of the recession. Each of the participants had to face reality and begin to plan and prioritize while dealing with the looming uncertainty. The second theme highlights the specific actions that were taken by the leaders during the recession. While dealing with the emotions of their teams, they were required to execute cost reduction savings plans while still finding a way to accomplish their goals. The third theme illustrates the connection the leaders felt to their organizations and also their internal drives. Passion and commitment were embedded deep within each of the participants which enabled them to keep going during the

difficult times. The fourth theme illustrates the camaraderie and closeness that existed between the leaders and their teams. Most importantly, each of the leaders used their values to guide them and engaged in open, honest, and transparent communication.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how global executive leaders responded to the global recession in 2008 and 2009, and to understand what they learned as a result of their responses. As a global finance leader and member of senior leadership teams for global companies over the past nine years, I experienced challenges as I led my company and teams through the recession. The recession brought increased levels of uncertainty and volatility and, as a result, brought uncertainty and abrupt changes into my organization. Faced with slashing costs, reorganizing infrastructure, reprioritizing objectives, and record low customer orders, I was forced to rethink leadership that had worked previously. It is essential that we understand the knowledge skills and attitudes that are needed to lead global enterprises during these turbulent and uncertain times. The recession in 2008 and 2009 presented global enterprises stormy waters to navigate. This experience led to my interest in wanting to understand the experiences of other executive leaders who led during this recent crisis and learning from their stories. It was my hope that other global executive leaders would benefit from the experiences of these participants.

My research question was: *How did global executive leaders respond to the global recession crisis and what did they learn?* In order to gain a deep and in-depth understanding to answer this question, I chose to conduct a collective case study. I selected four global executive leaders to participate in my research. For each participant I noted their age, position, education, and longevity at their respective companies in an effort to achieve diversity for my study.

In addition to interviewing the four leaders, I interviewed two witnesses who were best positioned to validate and describe the participant's leadership during the recession. I completed

the data analysis using two stages of analysis—within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. I presented findings through individual narratives for the within-case analysis. Findings were presented as themes and subthemes for the cross-case analysis. The four cases that comprised this collective case study provided a deeper understanding into the responses of global executive leaders during the 2008 and 2009 recession.

This final chapter is intended to interpret the findings presented previously and develop meaning from the themes that emerged while referencing previous research, where applicable. I will discuss the implications of these findings for the field of organizational development, discuss the limitations of this study, and make suggestions for future research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The global executive leaders who participated in this study demonstrated that they could lead through a global recession. For this study, the criteria required to be a successful leader were not specifically defined. I find it notable that the companies in this study are still functioning today with profitable financials. Triangulation of data gathered from other employees provided further evidence that these leaders did respond to the global financial crisis in a way that contributed, in some way, to the success of their organizations.

In this study, four patterns emerged from the data. The four major themes were:

- Dealing with looming uncertainty
- Focusing on what was important
- Connection to organization
- We are all in this together

### **Dealing with looming uncertainty**

Dealing with unpredictability and uncertainty was a major theme that emerged as a result of this study. Given the constantly changing conditions, the participants in this study were faced with a turbulent environment and an urgent need to face their new reality. This finding is consistent with previous research that indicates global leaders will need to be able to deal with abruptness, uncertainty, unpredictability, and changing realities (James & Wooten, 2010; Gilbert and DeVilbiss 2010; Vaill, 1996). In addition, this study illustrated that the world and leaders are still dealing with looming uncertainty. This finding is consistent with Greenberg and Sweeney (2011). As global organizations continue to move into the future, leaders will need to continue to deal with looming uncertainties and help their employees through the uncertain times.

### **Focusing on What Was important.**

The second major theme of this study was that the leaders felt compelled to focus on what was most important. Three subthemes emerged from the study: reducing costs, focusing on the customer, and accomplishing goals. While the subthemes revealed the specifics of the work the participants chose to accomplish, I will discuss the broader theme of focusing on what was important.

As the recession had a domino effect on countries around the world, the four executive leaders were all required to look beyond the financials and the day to day execution of their responsibilities. The findings in this study suggest the leaders felt compelled to adapt their leadership style to one that would be more appropriate for a crisis situation. This finding is consistent with existent research that argued that the powers of globalization not only reach into

the economic and political realms, but also challenge ethical assumptions and change leadership styles (Held & McGrew, 1999; Mitroff, Mason, & Pearson, 1994; Steger, 2003).

The findings in this study suggest that tasks and objectives which previously seemed to be top priority were no longer the most critical within the context of the global recession. The participants were faced with discovering how to focus their teams and the organization. This task presented challenges because the priorities seemed to continually change. They were required to face a new and constantly changing reality and they found globalization to be one of the drivers of the shifting priorities. As a result, the participants were moved to keep reprioritizing and refocusing their efforts and teams to ensure they were working on the right initiatives. This finding is consistent with James and Wooten's (2010) assertion that times of crisis require a leader who can process conflicting information and act in a quick and decisive manner.

The findings of this study were consistent with Adler (1999) who argued that global leadership, unlike domestic leadership, requires gathering and processing information from many different cultures. Ultimately, the leader needs to make meaning of the information. During the time leading up to the recession and once the recession became a reality, the participants were required to work deeper on a personal level and challenge previous assumptions that worked for them before the recession. They were required to change their processes and the way they worked in order to become more attuned to the implications and needs of other cultures across the world. In their efforts to focus on what was most important, each participant possessed a heightened level of awareness and increased desire to understand how their decisions and actions would impact other countries and cultures. They were also required to look beyond the day-to-day management of people and tasks in an effort to teach their teams how to deal with looming



uncertainty and the unknown as they carved out their potential paths. This finding is also supported by previous research (De Vries & Florent-Treacy, 2002; James & Wooten, 2010; McGarvie, 2009).

The findings from this study suggested that global leadership during the recession was different and, at times, required a different environment. Most notably, the leadership of the participants provided a certain type of environment that, in part, enabled the most important work of the organization to be accomplished. The leaders provided, at times, the environment which was needed to allow effective planning and prioritization. While there was not commonality in how the environment was created, the end result was an environment that enabled open dialogue, planning, and discussion. This atmosphere helped enable the leader to focus and prioritize what was most important at any given time. Triangulation supported the notion that the environment created by the leaders was a critical component which enabled the work to be accomplished quickly and globally.

### **Connection to the Organization**

The third major theme of this study was that the leaders felt a deep connection to their organization and their employees. Two subthemes emerged from this major theme: passion for success and commitment.

The first subtheme, passion for success, surprised me. While I agree that passion for success is important, and have experienced the positive results of passion many times, I was surprised at the intensity of passion in this study. The findings of this study suggest the participants possessed a deep connection to their organizations and an unwavering passion for success. I heard many stories from the participants that supported this theme. It was exciting to hear them speak with high levels of excitement and passion. At times, during the interviews, the

participants would move to the edge of their chairs as they spoke. Triangulation of data supported the observation that when the leaders spoke and led their respective teams, the passion in their voices and in their actions was prevalent. The passion had different drivers, including values, purpose, mission, and customers. While the drivers for the passion were not consistent, the common thread was everyone in this study had a passion for their organization, employees, and customers.

My initial literature review did not include passion; however, I did find an article that argued the importance of passion for a winning culture. Jamail (2011) argued that while passion is difficult to achieve in organizations, those who do achieve it are better positioned to weather difficult times.

This passion led to the leaders' belief that all things are possible and success was the only acceptable option. Triangulation suggested the passionate employees felt a sense of community and deep levels of support from their leaders. Triangulation also supported the idea that the environment created by the leaders was a key ingredient in the employees' feeling safe and connected to the organization. This deep connection resulted in a passion to work towards achieving the desired success of the organization. As the participants in this study demonstrated an unwavering resilience when faced with difficult and turbulent conditions, they possessed a strong passion to not disappoint those around them. This passion became infectious and spread to others. As a result, they were able to engage others and offset others' lower levels of morale.

The second subtheme was commitment. Previous research suggests that organizational commitment is driven by the organization's values or by how an organization contributes to the feelings of an employee (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer, Irving, & Allen, 1998; Shore & Wayne, 1993). The participants in this study fostered organizational commitment by providing open and

honest communication throughout the recession. They talked frequently about their beliefs and feelings regarding the organization. Triangulation supported that this behavior resonated with the employees and resulted in increased levels of employee commitment. The employees looked to the leaders in this study to model commitment. They watched the actions of the participants and followed their lead. All organizations experience different levels of commitment from their employees. The findings of this research suggest this commitment was, in part, the underlying driver that kept everyone going in the right direction.

In this study, the commitment ignited action. Meyer & Allen (1991) argued that identification with the organization results in employees' loyalty. The findings of this study are consistent and, in addition, its results imply that the loyalty drove action. While the participants in this study each faced their own fears and challenges, each of them was able to dig deep within and act. More importantly, they were able to drive their organizations to act. This study supports the assertion that commitment is one of the reasons they were able to persevere.

### **We Are All in This Together**

One of the findings of this study illustrates the camaraderie and closeness that existed between the leaders and their teams. The employees and executive leaders who participated in this study had multiple motivations for their work and actions during the recession; however, a feeling of closeness and togetherness was at the core. The results of this study illustrated the feeling of connectedness is linked to the theme of commitment. The employees were connected to the organization and to each other. This finding is consistent with previous research. Meyer and Allen (1991) and Meyer, Irving, and Allen (1998 and 1991) presented that favorable experiences in the workplace are powerful drivers of commitment. This commitment can result in a feeling of togetherness and the belief that the hard times can be overcome. These

experiences might be higher-level organizational values and beliefs, or the result of interactions with managers and fellow employees.

Triangulation of data also supported that the employees who worked with the participants possessed unwavering and relentless levels of commitment. As they were dealing with pay cuts, lost employees, and personal struggles in the face of the recession, their unwavering commitment to their leaders and their organizations drove them to keep moving forward and achieve the desired success for their organizations.

### **Implications for Organization Development**

This research sought to gain an understanding of the experiences of global leaders and the behaviors and processes they used to lead their organizations during the global recession. The study deeply examined the leadership practices and associated learning during the global recession. In addition, the study explored leaders' experiences of work during crisis and their actions in response to the crisis. Today's leaders will need to begin to prepare for the future as globalization intensifies (Martin, 2007).

This study has specific application to the fields of organization development and leadership given that we are living in a complex and unpredictable time. Globalization consists of factors that are weakening or even eliminating individual states (Gardner, 2008). This globalization is a "major irrevocable event" which has had a major influence on today's strategic and global leadership practices (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). The result of these changes will require the development of new leadership practices that will lead us through and beyond these turbulent times. Global leadership during turbulent times is difficult. The findings of this study have implications for practitioners who work in and with businesses in global environments:

1. Helping organizational leaders to develop global leadership training. In addition to improving domestic leadership, this training might include programs to increase cultural awareness.
2. Working with organizations to develop methods and tools to assist leaders dealing with complex information. Managers and leaders will need to be able to simplify information and actions for employees in an increasingly complex world.
3. Helping organizations understand the importance of focus and formal priority setting. For example, organizations might implement processes which encourage employees to reflect on current initiatives to ensure they are the most relevant.
4. Working with leaders to increase commitment levels and connectedness. While this would vary depending on the organization, an employee's ability to connect with the organization might increase performance.
5. Successful global leadership during turbulent times requires a combination of factors which include technical business skills in addition to softer behavioral skills. Organizations would benefit from practitioners helping them identify and achieve the appropriate balance.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research was conducted by studying the experiences and learning of global executives who led during the 2008 and 2009 recession. The International Monetary Fund defines a global recession as a period of global economic growth of three percent or less. Using this definition, there are four periods since 1985 that would qualify: 1990-1993, 1998, 2001-2002, and 2008-2009. It would be beneficial to explore the experiences of global executive leaders during multiple recessions.

The three companies represented in this research are headquartered in Minnesota. Continued research is recommended to study companies who are headquartered in different states, and further, companies that are headquartered outside of the United States.

Nine executives were considered for this study before selection of the four who ultimately participated. All nine executives were in their forties. A study that includes a sample of leaders outside of that age bracket may confirm or contrast with the findings of this study.

Without exception, the four executive leaders in this study were perceived by their peers to be successful leaders during the global recession. The three companies represented in this study remain financially profitable and viable at the time this research was concluded. A study that examines leaders who were perceived as unsuccessful may confirm or contrast with the findings of this study.

A study that examines multiple leaders employed at the same company may confirm or contrast with the findings of this study.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study reflected boundaries of the cases. Specifically, this study focused only on the global recession of 2008 and 2009 and did not consider previous recessions. In addition all companies were headquartered in the United States, specifically in the State of Minnesota.

This study provided a deeper understanding of the responses of global executive leaders during the 2008 and 2009 recession. While the cases offered data, they represented a small sample of industries: manufacturing, global services and solutions, and beauty products and related services. The findings of this study cannot be extended broadly to include all populations in similar industries.

The findings in this study were based on participant interviews. The participants were asked to reflect and remember events that happened three to four years ago. Their ability to remember events and feeling may influence the accuracy of the study.

Given the limited sample of cases in this study, the results cannot be generalized. It was intended to give a composite look at the experiences of each of the participants.

While this research was enhanced by triangulating data, member checks, audit trail, and in-depth descriptions how the study was conducted, it is ultimately the decision of the reader to decide if the findings can be transferred to their own context (Merriam 1998; Stake, 2006).

### **Personal Reflections**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how global executive leaders responded to the global recession in 2008 and 2009, and to understand what they learned as a result of their responses. As a global finance leader and member of senior leadership teams for global companies over the past nine years, I experienced challenges as I led my company and teams through the recession. This experience led to my interest in wanting to understand the experiences of other executive leaders who led during this recent crisis and learn from their stories.

Without exception, the participants in this study were perceived as successful leaders who contributed, in part, to the success of their teams and organizations. In addition, the positive nature of the interviews demonstrated the respect and admiration that was felt for the participants. Triangulation supported that the participants of this study were perceived to be focused, thoughtful, and caring. This finding surprised me. Given the high level of uncertainty and resulting stress caused by the global recession, I had expected some negativity. The tone of the interviews was, without exception, positive, uplifting, and inspirational.

The participants in this study were, without exception, transparent with information. They believed in open and honest communication and did not withhold information from their employees and peers. In addition, the participants indicated they became frustrated when other leaders in the organization did not demonstrate transparency. This is consistent with my personal experience. The most successful leaders that I witnessed during the global recession made it a priority to communicate openly and frequently.

On a personal note, I have conducted business in over 20 countries throughout my career. For 10 years of my professional life, I have spent half my time outside of the United States. When I decided to pursue a doctoral degree, I decided to study outside the field of finance and economics in an effort to be a more effective leader. Over the course of my career, I have observed many Chief Financial Officers who did not seem to understand people. I believe my ability to understand and influence others will make me a stronger and more effective leader.

Global companies will continue to be faced with complex challenges. I believe they will need senior executive leaders, like the ones who participated in this study, to lead their organizations through these turbulent times. It is my hope that other global executive leaders will benefit from the experiences of the wise and resilient leaders who participated in this study.



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## Appendix A

### Letter to Executive Leader

[Date]

Dear [Name]

My name is Theresa Thompson and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of St Thomas and I am beginning my dissertation research.

The purpose of my research is to examine leadership practices and learning's during the 2009 global recession and to gain an understanding of the experience, specifically the leader's response to the crisis. My research will focus on what was learned and how we might apply the learning's in the future.

I am looking for executive leaders to participate in my study. Participation in this research is voluntary and there is no financial compensation.

You have been asked to participate because you meet the following criteria:

- Your position is Director level or higher
- You were in position from January 1, 2008 – June 30, 2009
- You had global responsibility
- You had financial accountability

If you participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a one hour interview at a location that is convenient for you. In addition, I will ask for 4-5 names of employees in your organization who witnessed your leadership during the recession. I will select 2 of the individuals to interview. The individuals I select will be kept confidential. Your identity, company affiliations and all information provided to me will be held in strict confidence. If needed, you may be asked to participate in a follow up interview.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Theresa Thompson  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of St. Thomas  
Organization Learning and Development  
651.208.8828  
Theresa@pcllookout.com

## Appendix B

### Letter to Employees Who Worked With Executive Leader

[Date]

Dear [Name]

My name is Theresa Thompson and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of St Thomas and I am beginning my dissertation research.

The purpose of my research is to examine leadership practices and learning's during the 2009 global recession and to gain an understanding of the experience, specifically [name of executive leader] response to the crisis. My research will focus on what was learned and how we might apply the learning's in the future.

You have been asked to participate because you are someone who witnessed the leadership activities of an executive leader who is participating in my research [insert name]. The leader provided 4-5 names of employees of which I selected 2 individuals to interview. The selected individuals will not be known to the executive leader [insert name].

If you participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a one hour interview at a location that is convenient for you. I will also be asking questions regarding your experience with [insert name] leadership during the global recession. All information will be confidential and will be presented in aggregate to protect your identity. Your identity and company affiliations will be held in strict confidence.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Theresa Thompson  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of St. Thomas  
Organization Learning and Development  
651.208.8828  
Theresa@pcllookout.com

## **Appendix C**

### **CONSENT FORM**

#### **UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

##### **Leadership Response to the Global Crisis: An Interpretive Case Study**

###### **IRB log #:**

I am conducting research regarding the experience of executive leaders during the 2009 global recession. I invite you to participate in this research. Your participation is voluntary. You were selected as a possible participant because you were in an executive leadership role during the recession with global responsibility combined with financial accountability or you worked with an executive leader who is participating in this research. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this research.

This research is being conducted by: Theresa Thompson, a doctoral candidate in Organizational Development at the University of St. Thomas. My research advisor is Dr. John Conbere, Professor in the College of Applied Professional Studies, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota.

###### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this research is to examine leadership practices and learning's during the 2009 global recession and to gain an understanding of the experience, specifically the leader's response to the crisis. The research will focus on what was learned and how we might apply the learning's in the future.

###### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this research, I will ask you to participate in a one hour interview at a location that is convenient for you. In addition, I will ask you to review the general findings of the research to determine if they are consistent with your experience.

###### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

I see no risks for you in participating in this study.

There is no financial compensation for participating in this study.

###### **Confidentiality:**

Your answers will be kept confidential and you will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity. All data will be kept confidential in securely locked files. Your privacy will be protected at all times. I will use your pseudonym on recordings and transcriptions to ensure you and your company will not be identified. The pseudonym and your associated identity will be known only to me. In my dissertation or published articles, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or your company in any way. All recordings will be destroyed upon successful completion of my dissertation.





## **Appendix D**

### **Participant Interview Guide**

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about your experiences during the global recession. How did you spend the majority of your time? What challenges did you face? What did you do to address these challenges?

Sub questions: How did you feel? With the benefit of hindsight, what did you learn?

Probing questions as needed: Can you describe? How did you react professionally and personally? What kept you awake at night? Can you provide some examples?

#### **Optional Questions (If these are not addressed in the response to question 1)**

2. Do you think you were successful in your leadership during the crisis? How do you define/measure your success?
3. What do you think distinguished you from other leaders during the crisis?
4. What was your greatest leadership contribution during the recession?
5. As a result of leading through a global recession and crisis, what did you learn? Has your perspective of your role as a leader changed? If so, how? Can you describe?
6. Is there anything else concerning your experiences that you would like to add?

## **Appendix E**

### Secondary Participant Interview Guide

#### **Interview Questions**

1. What is your relationship to [insert name of executive leader]?
2. I am interested in what it was like here during the crisis, and how [insert name of executive leader] led the organization during the crisis. What can you tell me?

Probing questions as needed: Please describe examples.

#### **Optional Questions (If these are not addressed in the response to questions 1 and 2)**

3. From your perspective was [name] a successful leader during the global recession? Why or why not? How do you define success?
4. What do you think distinguished [name] from other leaders? What was [name] greatest leadership contribution during the crisis?